The Nature of Things:
Reinterpreting the Still Life Genre
in the Twenty First Century

Sally Cleary
MA (Fine Art), RMIT University, Melbourne; Dip Visual Art, Canberra School of Art (ANU)

Doctor of Philosophy by Project

School of Art, College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
July 2014
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signed:

Sally Elizabeth Cleary

Date: 8 July, 2014
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their support, guidance and assistance during the execution of this PhD and accompanying exegesis:

Supervisors:
Dr Irene Barberis (Senior supervisor)
Dr Ruth Johnstone (Second supervisor)

Other:
Dr Sophia Errey: Proof reader (second draft) and professional advice
Robert Sheehan: Proof reader (final draft)
Annalea Beatie: Writing Circles Co-ordinator
Eliza Greenhatch: Layout and Design assistance
School of Art Research Administration staff 2007-2014
Family, friends and colleagues, for their encouragement and patience.
Abstract

The Nature of Things:
Re-interpreting the Still-Life Genre in the Twenty-first Century

The different aspects of ecology, including human ecology and the impact of 'man’s ecological footprint' on the natural native environment are the main themes of my doctoral project.

The still life genre creates an ideal premise for this investigation, due to its long history dating back to antiquity, which often used familiar everyday objects to reveal the fundamental social, cultural and political aspects of society in which they are produced. The re-interpretation of traditional still life, and the re-investigation of traditional craft skills and techniques, with the incorporation of mixed-media, forms the premise of my research for this Doctorate.

My research examines current trends in fine art practice, particularly ‘hybrid’ craft practices and mixed media artworks that seek to re-investigate or re-interpret the still life genre in the 21st century. Concurrently I have developed a body of work that specifically explores these cross-disciplinary mechanisms and classifications to reflect on our changing natural environment. These works reference current socio and/or political aspects of contemporary society concerning environmental issues by using symbolic objects and their arrangement, as metaphors for the fragility and vulnerability of our natural ecological systems.
# Table of Contents

1. **Catalogue of Artworks**  
   Refer to ADR - separate attachment  
   1.1. Project 1: The Unswept Floor (2007) p. 1  
   1.2. Project 2: Land and Identity (2007) p. 2  
   1.4. Project 4: Mimesis (2008) p. 3  
   1.5. Project 5: The Nature of Things (2009) p. 6  
   1.8. Project 8: Re-collections (2011) p. 8  
   1.11. Project 11: Silent Night (2013) p. 10  

2. **Exegesis Chapters**  
   2.1. Introduction p. 12  
   2.2. Introduction – Addenda - contents p. 23  
   2.3. Chapter 1: The Unswept Floor p. 29  
   2.4. Chapter 2: Notions of Still Life and Landscape p. 57  
   2.5. Chapter 3: Mimesis p. 86  
   2.6. Chapter 4: The Nature of Things p. 109  
   2.7. Chapter 5: Silent Life p. 142  

3. **Bibliography** p. 171  

4. **List of Images as they appear in the exegesis** p. 181  

5. **Appendix** p. 192  
   5.2. Bush Tales: Diary Entries p. 212  

6. **Support Material - Essays and journal articles** p. 230  
   6.1. Dr. Sophia Errey – Land and Identity p. 231  
   6.2. Dr. Irene Barberis – Re-collections, Catalogue essay p. 233  
   6.4. Dr. Ruth Johnstone – Rivers of Slip p. 237  

7. **Curriculum Vitae** p. 239  

8. **List of attached catalogues and digital files** p. 244  

9. **Dedication** p. 245
Catalogue of Artworks

The Nature of Things: Re-interpreting the Still Life Genre in the 21st Century
2007-2014

Project 1: The Unswept Floor, 2007 (Reference Chapter 1)
e.g.etal, Little Collins Street
July 23 – 5 August, 2007

Series #1
1. Installation view
2. The Unswept Floor (detail 1)
3. The Unswept Floor (detail 2)
4. The Unswept Floor (detail 3)
5. Danielle’s Heart
   6x15x35 cm
   Porcelain forms, ‘choko’ seed pod, gum leaf, blue ‘milk’ paint wooden plinth.
6. Of Life and Love
   5x18x30 cm
   Porcelain forms, gum leaf, small white & pink moth, blue ‘milk’ paint wooden plinth.
7. Swirling around
   4x20x20 cm
   Porcelain forms, (curly) gum leaf, blue ‘milk’ paint wooden plinth.
8. Blowing in the wind
   4x30x30 cm
   Porcelain forms, birch leaves, blue ‘milk’ paint wooden plinth.
9. Of the earth, sea and sky
   5x60x16 cm
   Porcelain forms, native seed pod, sea snail shell, ‘raptor’ feather, blue ‘milk’ paint wooden plinth.
10. Of the earth, sea and sky (detail 1)
11. Of the earth, sea and sky (detail 2)

Series #2
12. She who dreams
   5x60x16 cm
   Porcelain forms, gum tree branches with small gum nuts, ‘Lipstick’ maple leaf, blue ‘milk’ paint wooden plinth.
13. She who dreams (detail 1)
14. She who dreams (detail 2)
Only the strong survive
6x35x15 cm
Saggar fired terracotta forms, painted twig with seed pods, blue ‘milk’ paint wooden plinth.

Black series

Untitled #1
4x20x20 cm
Porcelain forms, native seed pod, gum leaf, black foam core board.

Untitled #2
5x18x30 cm
Porcelain forms, gum nut, black foam core board.

Project 2: Land and Identity, 2007  (Reference Chapter 2)
Stephen McLaughlan Gallery
1 August – 1 September, 2007

1. Installation view
2. Forest Floor #2
9x102x18 cm
Bark base, porcelain detritus, vine with heart shaped leaves, red maple leaves, grassy sprig.

3. Escarpment
9x40x16 cm
Terracotta ceramic base, porcelain detritus, terracotta (saggar fired) detritus, gum tree sprig.

4. Arakoon
40x34x25 cm
Polystyrene base, porcelain detritus, driftwood, aqua blue rope, seed pod (all ‘found’ objects collected at Hat Head Beach, Arakoon, NSW).

5. Escarpment and Arakoon, installation view.

6. Wood Fungus
15x34x27 cm
Wood fungus base, porcelain detritus, maple seed sprigs.

7. Dry Dam
18x31x26 cm
Terracotta ceramic base (saggar fired), porcelain detritus, terracotta (saggar fired) detritus, silver birch branches, yellow everlasting daisies.

8. Forest Floor #3
5x30x14 cm
Mauve/brown bark base with holes, porcelain detritus, terracotta detritus (saggar fired), palonia seedpods.

9. Winter Landscape
5x42x14 cm
Porcelain base, porcelain forms, long twisted piece of bark, cluster of silver white ‘princess gum’ gumnuts.
10. White Landscape #24
   5x5x12 cm
   Porcelain base, porcelain forms, terracotta form, twig with native seed pods.

11. White Landscape #20
   12x5x10 cm
   Porcelain base, porcelain forms, ‘Princess gum’ gum nut.

12. Forest Floor #1
   9x23x23 cm
   Bark base, porcelain forms, maple leaf, gum leaf.

13. Lily
   8x18x12 cm
   Marble base, hand formed and glazed lily, porcelain forms, bark.

14. White Landscape #21
   10x12x5 cm
   Porcelain base, porcelain form, terracotta form.

Project 3: Notions of Still Life and Landscape, 2007 (Reference Chapter 2)
School of Art Gallery, RMIT, Melbourne
22 October – 2 November 2007

1. Installation view

2. Net
   300(h)x1700(l)x90(w)x40(d) cm
   Bird net, porcelain

3. Still Life with Boxes
   200x120x150 cm
   Desk, chair, mirror, assorted found boxes, detritus- including nest, gum leaves, gum nuts, insects; hand formed porcelain.

4. Still Life with Boxes (detail)

5. Eighteen pieces of slate
   95x360x30 cm
   Slate, detritus, hand formed porcelain.

6. Desiccator
   35x30 cm
   Glass desiccator, pink salt, porcelain detritus.

7. Drawing
   120x180cm
   Pencil on hand made paper

8. Drawing (detail)
Project 4: Mimesis, 2008  (Reference Chapter 3)
Red Gallery, Contemporary Art Space
28 May - 14 June 2008

1. Installation view with Net #2 (far back)
   Net #2: 200x80 cm
   Bird net, porcelain organic forms, natural organic detritus.

2. Net #2 (detail)

3. Mimesis: Caught in the Forest
   80x40x5 cm
   Metallic printed digital photograph, porcelain form, organic detritus,
   King parrot feather, White cockatoo feather.

4. Mimesis: Silver Bower
   40x80x5 cm
   Metallic printed digital photograph, porcelain forms, organic detritus,
   bird skull and bones.

5. Mimesis: Agapanthus
   80x40x5 cm
   Metallic printed digital photograph, porcelain forms, organic detritus,
   dragonfly.

6. Mimesis: Branch
   80x40x5 cm
   Metallic printed digital photograph, porcelain forms, Crimson Rosella
   feathers.

7. Garden series 1: Set of 6 digital photographs in box frames with mixed
   media.
   33x39x4 cm each
   Garden #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6
   Porcelain forms, organic detritus including fox jaw, bush rat skeleton,
   snake skeleton, cicada shell, butterflies, grass hopper, feathers, gum
   leaves, sticks, wheat grass; Humanmade objects including shotgun
   cartridge.

8. Garden #1
   33x39x4 cm
   Porcelain forms; organic detritus, fox jaw, shotgun cartridge.

9. Garden #2
   33x39x4 cm
   Porcelain forms; organic detritus including, snake skeleton, feather,
   gum leaves, wheat grass.

10. Garden #1 (detail)

11. Garden #2 (detail)

12. Garden #6
   33x39x4 cm
   Porcelain form, organic detritus including feathers, stick with lichen,
   native seed pod, maple seed pod.
13. Garden #8
33x39x4 cm
Porcelain forms, organic detritus including bush rat skeleton, butterfly, grass hopper, feathers, gum leaves, stick with lichen, maple seed pods.

14. Garden #6 (detail)
15. Garden #8 (detail)
Porcelain forms, feather.

109x109x4 cm
Unfurling, Orange nest, Branch, Agapanthus, Branches, Silver nest, Garden urn, Tree knot, Garden path.
Porcelain organic forms; Organic detritus including leaves, beetle, feathers; Humanmade objects including shearer's comb and match.

17. Garden series 2: Unfurling
33x33x4 cm (framed)
Porcelain form, feather.

18. Garden series 2: Silver Nest
33x33x4 cm (framed)
Porcelain form, feather.

19. Garden series 2: Shasta Daisy
33x33x4 cm (framed)
Porcelain form, leaf, seed pods.

20. Garden series 2: Orange Nest
33x33x4 cm (framed)
Porcelain forms, feather, leaf.

21. The Unswept Floor series: Set of 4 prints with mixed media.
33x39x4 cm each
Calendar prints from Saint Marks, Venice
The Unswept Floor #1, #2, #3, #4
Porcelain organic forms; organic detritus, including leaves, feathers, beetle, seed pods

22. The Unswept Floor #1
33x39x4 cm
Calendar print from Saint Marks, Venice
Timber box frame, black mount board, porcelain organic forms, feather.

23. The Unswept Floor #2
33x39x4 cm
Calendar print from Saint Marks, Venice
Timber box frame, black mount board, porcelain organic form, gum leaves, seed pod, beetle.

24. The Unswept Floor #2 (detail)
25. The Unswept Floor #3
33x39x4 cm
Calendar print from Saint Marks, Venice
Timber box frame, black mount board, porcelain organic forms, leaves, seed pods.
26. The Unswept Floor #4
33x39x4 cm
Calendar print from Saint Marks, Venice
Timber box frame, black mount board, porcelain organic forms, skeletal leaf, duck feather.

27. The Unswept Floor #3 (detail)
28. The Unswept Floor #4 (detail)

Project 5: The Nature of Things, 2009  (Reference Chapter 4)
First Site Gallery, RMIT University Link Arts
9 – 20 June 2009

1. Regeneration exhibition view
250x330x200 cm
Video File attached: Installation with video /sound overlaid; white painted furniture: bed, chair, desk, desk chair, mirror, white painted branches, paper notes with assorted random text written on on paper e.g. softly, sleeping, darkness, then, sweet, nothing...

2. Regeneration (detail 1)
3. Regeneration (detail 2)
4. Regeneration (detail 3)
5. Regeneration (detail 4)
6. Regeneration (detail 5)
7. Regeneration (detail 6)
3x120x30 cm(plinth size: 900x30x120 cm)
6 x Recycled black Japanese bonito boxes (3x20x30 cm) containing collections of detritus including skeletons, insects, seed pods, feathers etc; porcelain sticks.

8. Remember me when I am gone
94x150x120 cm
2 bird nests, 3 porcelain pod forms, red fruit net, artist pallet, tree root with porcelain detritus, bark with assorted porcelain forms, piece of bark with branch, snake skin, fox skull.

9. Remember me when I am gone (rear view)
10. Remember me when I am gone (detail 1)
11. Remember me when I am gone (detail 2)
12. Remember me when I am gone (detail 3)
13. Remember me when I am gone (detail 4)
14. Remember me when I am gone (detail 5)
15. Bonito Boxes
16. Bonito Boxes (side view)
17. Bonito Boxes (detail 1)
18. Bonito Boxes (detail 2)
Aireys Inlet Writers Festival, Kiss Me Too shop window
14 – 6 August 2009

1. Still Life with Books, installation view (detail 1)
   120x150x120 cm
   Desk, lamp, magnifying glass, dessicator, second hand books with ecological theme, detritus-including skull, insects, gum nuts; photographic artworks and drawings by artist.

2. Still Life with Books (detail 2)
   Magnifying glass, insects, drawings, Chinese mug, reference books

3. Still Life with Books (detail 3)
   Desiccator with sphagnum moss and porcelain forms, books

4. Still Life with Books (detail 4)
   Artwork (Mimesis-Garden series 1), koala skull, books, lamp base

5. Still Life with Books (detail 5)
   Koala skull on top of sketch-books.

6. Still Life with Books (detail 6)
   Side view with desk draws and chair, gum-nuts, reference books.

Drawing Room, Melbourne: Building 4, Bowen Street, RMIT University
2 August – 30 September 2010

1. Installation view
   Drawing: 300x100cm
   Sphagnum Moss square: 20x150x150cm
   Drawing from projected photograph: Charcoal, watercolour pencil
   Moss square: Sphagnum moss, including miscellaneous plants; burnt grass-tree forest remnants, including charcoal, soil, plant detritus, glass bottle, tin cans, porcelain objects, plastic drop sheet.

2. Installation view / detail 1

3. Moss square

4. Remnant Tree: Ash Wednesday 1983 / Overhead projector image

5. Drawing (detail)

6. Moss square (detail 1)

7. Moss square (detail 1)

8. Tin can with ‘Praying mantis’ trace.

9. Ceramic form (in centre of moss square) with King parrot feather and grass tree remains.

10. Moss square covered in plastic sheet (detail)
Project 8: Re-collections (2011)  Reference Chapter 4
Project Space, Melbourne: RMIT University Experimental Art Space
20 July – 6 August 2011

1. Exhibition view / Seven nests (Nests #1- #7), 2011
   Gallery size: 708 x 1231 cm
   Seven nests: 30x420x90 cm
   Wooden crates from ceramics factory in France, assorted found objects including plant and animal matter, flat cardboard boxes previously used for packing tiles.
   Acknowledgements: Nest #2-Ariela Nucci: grey shard with painted feather; Nest #3 – Belinda Kennedy: Cup with copper red glaze; Nest #4 – Po Ching Fang: 2 x stoneware cups; Nest #7- Jane Walton: cup.

2. Seven nests (side view detail)

3. Seven nests: Nest #1 (detail)

4. Seven nests: Nest #2 (detail)

5. Seven nests: Nest #3 (detail)

6. Seven nests: Nest #4 (detail)

7. Seven nests: Nest #5 (detail)

8. Seven nests: Nest #6 (detail)

9. Seven nests: Nest #7 (detail)

10. Exhibition view: Nest #8 / Archival prints

11. Nest #8, 2011
    30x60x90cm
    Wooden crate from ceramics factory in France, assorted found objects including plant and animal matter, side table.
    Acknowledgements: Po Ching Fang-lidded container.

12. Arkaroola, 2010
    140x180x40 cm
    Glass cabinet, brick sand, assorted found objects (from Arkaroola NSW), hand formed porcelain.

13. Arkaroola – side view

14. Arkaroola (detail 1)

15. Arkaroola (detail 2)

16. Four Blue Studies with Mesh, 2008
    95x120x30 cm
    Custom board plinths with milk paint, mixed media-found objects, mesh, hand formed ceramics.
    Acknowledgements: Ariela Nucci-porcelain form with painted feather, Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation- Tjanpi indigenous basket.
17. Four Blue Studies with Mesh (detail 1)
18. Four Blue Studies with Mesh (detail 2)
   95x120x30 cm
   Mixed media-found objects, hand formed ceramics.
20. Red Net (detail 1)
21. Red Net (detail 2)
22. Glass and Specimen Collections, 2010 / Chair with nests, 2011
   Exhibition view
23. Chair with nests, 2011 / Glass and Specimen Collections, 2010
   Alternative view
24. Glass and Specimen Collections, 2010 (detail)
   950x800x500 cm
   Desk, glass funnels, dessicators, petri dish and assorted glass
   containers. Assorted found objects (pine cones, skull, nylon string,
   plant and animal matter).
25. Glass and Specimen Collections (detail 2)
26. Chair with nests, 2011
   Painted chair, wooden nail box containing 6 (found) nests, Tjanpi
   basket, feathers, porcelain object by Ariela Nucci.
27. Night view from outside.

Archival Prints

Digital Photos on matt paper, 2011
32x45 cm (unframed)

1. Murray River-montage
2. Blue Feather, Hattah Lake-montage
3. Boonah garden with red hot pokers and blue tongue lizard –montage
4. Grass tree forest, Bambra –montage
5. Boonah garden with fox gloves and tree fern
6. Weed pile

Digital Photos on satin paper, 2011
32x45 cm (unframed)

7. Hattah Lakes
8. Oil can with skull
9. Porcelain pods
10. Sparrow / lizard skin
11. Dessert weeds
12. Dry river bed
**Project 9: Silent River, 2011**  (Reference Chapter 5)
Spare Room: RMIT University Experimental Art Space
20 July – 6 August 2011

1. Silent River, installation view – Day 1 (detail 1)
   Gallery size 219 x 370cm
   Mixed media installation / 20 minute sound scape (loop):
   Plastic tarpaulin, painted sticks, nylon rope, white casting slip, wooden
   board walk. Sound collaboration - field recordings and sonic sound
   scape: composed by John Nguyen. 20 minute sound scape (loop)

2. Silent River, Day 7 (detail 2)
3. Silent River (detail 3)
4. Silent River (detail 4)
5. Silent River (detail 5)
6. Silent River (detail 6)

**Project 10: XS (2011)**   Reference Chapter 5
Tooth and Nail, Cross Cultural Influences in Contemporary Ceramics
23 November 2011 – 22 September 2013
Touring group exhibition, curated by Stephen Gallagher

1. XS - Diptych composed of two panels
   82x56x6 cm each
   Porcelain forms, digital print, white (wooden) stretchers, green metallic
   polymer mesh, cotton.
2. XS - detail X / detail S
3. XS - detail S

**Project 11: Silent Night (2013)**   Reference Chapter 5
Craft Victoria, Gallery 3
17 January – 3 March 2013

   Gallery size 450x420 cm
   Mixed media installation
   Slip cast porcelain owl, wooden chair, white casting slip (floor), wooden
   boardwalk.
   Sound collaboration - field recordings and sonic sound scape:
   composed by John Nguyen. 5 minute sound scape (loop)
   Headphones x 2 sets.


**Project 12: Silent Life (2014) – Reference Chapter 5**

Geelong Regional Gallery, Max Bell Gallery

- Gallery size 1209x635 cm
- Mixed media installation
- 2 slip cast porcelain owls, 2 fence fence posts, white casting slip (floor), wooden boardwalk.
- Field recordings and sound samples. 7 minutes loop
- Lighting design collaboration: Danny Pettingall. 7 minute loop of coloured light emulating day transitioning to night and back to day.
The Nature of Things: Reinterpreting the Still Life Genre in the Twenty First Century

Introduction

More and more she could feel it, like a solid forest, growing up around her. The ceilings were high, and in the second year, to accommodate the new acquisitions, she had had the book-shelves extended all the way up. For a time they remained empty … but somehow, by donation, from the small budget, or from her own purchases, the books kept accumulating. She would look up and realize that another branch was growing, and think of the thousands of leaves, the ghosts of the trees that the paper had come from, the smell of the books that sometimes as she came in from the heat or the dust or the chill of the wind outside would whelm over her, like the scent of the humus on a rainforest floor. Vast and intimate, apparently deserted and yet full of creatures, secret trails, secret passages of the mind.

The subject of this PhD exegesis is multi-layered, and in many ways these layers are woven together, like the branches of a tree. At a glance we see the words in the title: nature, things, reinterpreting, still life, and twenty first century. These are the roots of this tree. In its entirety the project is a complete work of over 60 exhibited artworks. Completed over a seven-year period, it includes installations, drawings, mixed media sculpture and digital images, ten thematic exhibitions – from which the chapters of this exegesis have been formed – as well as written and analytical research in excess of 30,000 words.

Within my project’s core lies ‘nature’ and what it means to be ‘a part of’ or ‘apart from’ nature. What does it mean to live in a ‘natural’ environment, to observe this environment close up, and be aware of the fragile microcosms that exist within it? What is our relationship with nature, and what are the objects or things that exist together, symbiotically or otherwise, in the post-colonial landscape? This is the starting point for my artwork and subsequent research.

The chapters are its branches. These have been developed through research and analysing the major exhibitions of my artwork held over the past seven years, thematically extending up and out, crisscrossing over and under each other. They contain the artworks, exhibitions, and analytical research developed throughout the course of this study, as well as the theoretical content that informs my art practice. These chapters have been constructed in three parts. The first part is a discourse on the subject relating to the chapter’s title, linking them to the exegesis title, the research questions, and the developed artwork. The second part is an analysis of various projects and exhibitions related to this discourse. The third part is a separate folio containing images of the work. I have included within this folio of visual documentation an essay on process, which draws on the processes and methodology used in my own art practice.

I use the metaphor of a tree to commence this exegesis as a symbol of hope for the future of the planet. Trees and plants are the life force of the world – we cannot live without them. In the case of my own artwork, I am interested in the relationships we as human beings form with the natural world. If humans can
live in harmony with nature, and attempt to preserve nature through a love and understanding of their environment, protectors of fragile ecosystems through conscious and conscientious thought and actions, then it is possible to make small and large incremental steps that change the current status quo. We have a symbiotic relationship with nature, but in this hedonistic world of the twenty first century, we have exploited our relationship with the rest of the species and elements that make up our world, which has taken billions of years to develop.

The subject of this PhD exegesis – the reinterpretation of still life in the twenty first century – can also be interpreted as a metaphor for connecting with ecology. Historically, traditional Dutch still life paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries acted as vanitas, or memento mori, to remind the viewers of the fragile nature of existence in a world facing economic change, and warn them of the consequences of greed and vanity. In a similar way, many of the artworks represented in this exegesis can be read as a warning of ecological devastation.

In his biography of earth, *Here on Earth* (2010), Tim Flannery attempts to take an optimistic stance on the future of our planet, and subsequently subtitles his book, ‘An Argument for Hope’. With humankind posited above the rest of nature on a human-made hierarchical scale, we have subjected the earth’s regional biospheres to the possibilities of extreme imbalance – perhaps to a point of no return. I agree with Flannery that it is humanity alone that has to make important tactical and proactive decisions about the future of our environments. As an individual I can make a positive contribution by developing and exhibiting artwork in the public domain that focuses on our relationship with the natural world, and invite contemplation (and public awareness) about the environment, including the future of our fragile ecosystems.

1 Ecology: 1. a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments. 2. the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment. Human ecology: 1. a branch of sociology dealing especially with the spatial and temporal interrelationships between humans and their economic, social, and political organisation. 2. the ecology of human communities and populations especially as concerned with preservation of environmental quality (as of air or water) through proper application of conservation and civil engineering practices. Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster.com. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecology, (accessed 2 May 2014).
The methodology for this exegesis has developed organically. By this I mean that the artworks developed through the processes of systematic making, observing and producing experimental artworks as ‘a sustained phenomenon or one marked by gradual changes through a series of states.’ This methodology is based on my interest in making artworks that examine my relationship with the rural and natural environments that I have lived in and visited within Australia since the turn of the millennium. Through making primarily mixed media sculpture and installation artworks, I have made connections with the still life genre, and through extensive research into both its historical and contemporary interpretations I have developed artwork around these central themes. This exegesis will look at these associations, and the trends in fine art practice which have influenced the outcomes of these artworks, from a personal, historical, and contemporary perspective. The processes I have explored have been detailed in diary entries in the Appendix 5.1 (Process).

Living in a rural environment at Boonah in south west Victoria has provided me with idyllic daily observations of flora and fauna. Over time I became consciously aware of the fragile ecology that exists in the natural world, and the impact of introducing non-indigenous species of plants and animals through agriculture, farming, and recreational activities, such as hunting and gardening. Consequently my research has included the sourcing of texts and artworks related to ecology, environmental history, and both non-fictional and fictional accounts of people exploring primarily the Australian landscape and environment. These texts have provided me with invaluable insight into the world of plants and animals: habitat, survival, regeneration, and relationships that form between animals, plants, people, objects, and places. During this period of time I have reflected on my surrounds, and interspersed these reflections as annotated diary entries throughout my chapters, to present an intimate insight into the place where I have resided for 15 years. The full version of this diary is included in Appendix 5.2 (Bush Tales).

---

3 These places include: Boonah, south west Victoria; Arakoon, central coast, NSW; Arkarooela, South Australia.
My studio space, located within this environment, is equipped with two electric kilns, as well as a large working space, providing me with room to construct, store collections, and set up my work. Included within most of my sculptures and installations are elements of ceramics, usually in the form of hand-modeled pieces of porcelain detritus: leaves, seedpods and other fragments of nature. These objects are purely representational – imaginary objects inspired by collecting, photographing, and observing my surrounds. Forming their own collections within my studio, they have been recontextualised in various installations and compositions within my artwork. My intention was to incorporate a handmade element – a personal manifestation that directly responds to nature, a human touch that is not intrusive, but confuses, invites enquiry, and contradicts ephemerality. While the natural materials will eventually decay, the fired ceramic forms will last forever. The whiteness of the porcelain not only provides accents within an artwork, their bone-like appearance also references mortality. Their various scales and forms (both linear and rounded) allow me to construct drawings and narratives with the individual pieces, which has led to hundreds of arrangements and configurations – exploring ideas and compositions – most of which have not been included in the documentation for this exegesis. They exist for the sole purpose of playing, in the form of three-dimensional drawing, and have led to the outcome of new artworks.

Photography and video became an important development within my own art practice, for the purpose of documentation and inspiration. My interest in these mediums as an artistic expression has also developed alongside my work, and led me to include photography in two exhibitions, ‘Mimesis’ (Red Gallery, 2010) and ‘Re-collections’ (Project Space, 2011). A five-minute video (with soundtrack) was projected onto objects in an installation, Regeneration, as part of ‘The Nature of Things’ (First Site Gallery, 2009). The recording and overlaying of soundscapes has featured in three other installations, Silent River (2011), Silent Night (2013), and Silent Life (2014) to reflect on habitat loss. Thus the mediums I have used and explored in relationship to developing new and original artworks have not consciously evolved but presented themselves through constantly examining the environment around me, through a range of mediums, processes, and exhibition outcomes.
The exhibitions held over the course of this exegesis have developed progressively, with the initial purpose of holding a solo exhibition every year. In the first year, 2007, I held three exhibitions: ‘The Unswept Floor’, e.g.etal, Melbourne; ‘Land and Identity’, Stephen McLaughlan Gallery, Melbourne; and ‘Notions of Still Life and Landscape’, RMIT School of Art Gallery, Melbourne. Although relatively quick in succession, these exhibitions laid the foundations for what I would continue to develop – mixed media sculpture and installations. The chapters of this written exegesis component have been formed from the titles of some of these exhibitions – referencing both my research and finished artworks.

Over the course of this research I have attempted to personally view the works of the artists and examples of similar artworks I have referenced. Research trips to Europe in 2012, and again in 2014, allowed me to visit art galleries and museums containing historical collections of still life and natural history from the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. I was in the fortunate position to explore contemporary international art, notably at dOCUMENTA 13 (Kassel, Germany) and in Berlin where I resided for one month in 2012. As a result of this investigation, many of the accounts of artist’s work are from a firsthand observation, and from catalogue essays, or artist’s personal websites. As there is a limit to the number of artists that I was able to reference, there are some omissions within this exegesis. I have included various artist’s work that I consider relevant to my own art practice, and whose artwork falls into the various categories I have prescribed below.

As much as possible, I have tried to restrict the content of my contemporary research (late twentieth and twenty first centuries) in this area, to artists who primarily explore works related to nature and ecology, and who develop artwork from non-traditional processes, in particular mixed media sculpture, craft practices, and installation based works. However, the still life genre is complex, embedded with symbolism and socio-political interpretations, which provides for a much wider discourse on discussions of art and politics, so at times I have included examples of painting and photography, which relate to more diverse topics and contemporary themes being explored in the wider art world. I will also delve into my own personal interpretation of still life in the twenty first century in an attempt to cast a new perspective on the genre.
The first Chapter, The Unswept Floor, references a famous, second century BCE, Greek mosaic – *asarotos oikos*, *The Unswept Room* (or ‘Floor’). This mosaic is commonly referred to and cited by a number of historians as one of the first and finest examples of still life art. This first chapter explores the origins and progress of the still life genre, which would fully develop during the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, and continue to grow in popularity over the next three centuries, and into the first two decades of the twenty first century.

*The Unswept Floor* is a major theme in the development of my artwork for this exegesis, and has recurred in three-dimensional sketches and installation artworks over again throughout the duration of my exegesis. I will discuss its significance as a vehicle for exploring and re-interpreting the still life genre, with particular reference to my own artwork, and other related works of art.

Within Chapter One I have quoted several art historians who have written extensively on the subject of traditional still life art dating back to antiquity. My aim was to collect and summarise the historical aspects of this subject, and provide a broad background on the history of still life, based on previous academic research. It is not my intention to rewrite the work of renowned scholars in this area, notably the research of Charles Sterling (1956), Norman Bryson (1990), Sybille Elbert-Shifferer (1999), and Norbert Schneider (1999), whose texts on this subject I have read at length.

In many ways the first chapter can be read as a second introduction, introducing the themes that the still life genre presents over the course of its long history. The underlying concepts and themes of the genre include: realistic representations of nature and human-made objects, with the exclusion of the figure; the staging of these objects; the use of craft based skills, both prior to the seventeenth century, and after the twentieth century; the symbols represented within objects which allude to other thematic concepts, such as mortality, and social discourse; the idea of collecting

---

objects for the purposes of display and classification and the significance of these collections and their taxonomic presentation; the connections with time and place through the objects represented and the style of art in which they are interpreted; and finally, an awareness of the fragility of life which directly relates to humanity’s relationship with the natural world – which in this case can be understood as ‘life before death’, or ‘death after life’.

Chapter Two, Notions of Still Life and Landscape, examines artwork that captures a sense of still life, specifically related to landscape, ecology and the environment. I will discuss how this subject relates to my own art practice and will also examine the work of contemporary Australian artists such as Fiona Hall, Louise Weaver, and Ken Yonatani, and international artists Olafur Eliasson (Denmark) and Ai Wei Wei (China), who have investigated these overlapping themes and concepts in their artwork. This chapter also explores the concept of installation art as a way of becoming immersed in a still life artwork, and how this changes our perception of viewing the work.

Furthermore, I examine Australian environmental history, and the ecology of the earth. I investigate the role that man plays in both its destruction and conservation. I have used the research and insightful observations of Tim Flannery to support the arguments that I raise within this chapter. The issues that I raise pertaining to the ecology, particularly my concerns about extinction of plant and animal species, form the underlying rationale for the artwork I have produced since 2010. These works explore concepts of the environment (notions of still life and landscape) in the form of immersive installation artworks. I will return to these concepts in my final chapter and conclusion, Silent Life.

Chapter Three investigates the idea of ‘mimesis’ in still life. The idea of mimicking objects so that they appear realistic has played an important role in the still life genre. As a subject for further investigation, I will discuss in detail its origins and contemporary interpretations, and relate it back to my practice. An exhibition of my artwork, ‘Mimesis’, held at Red Gallery, Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne, explored photography and mixed media
based works. Nowhere in art is the mimesis of objects more obvious than in photography; however, these works takes an additional step by including other artifacts and handmade objects. Case studies for this chapter include the artwork of Australian artists Louise Weaver, Ricky Swallow, Marion Drew, and Julie Bartholomew, and international artists Anne Wenzel (Germany) and Cai Guo-Qiang (China).

Through the contemporary artworks I examine in this chapter, I discuss the device of ‘the detail’ – inherent in handmade objects and skilled artistic processes – as a vehicle for drawing the audience into the narrative and underlying meaning of the work. The staging of the objects composed by the artist also plays a mimetic role, and is related to trompe l’oeil theatre sets from antiquity. These two thematic interpretations relating to still life are also inherent in the traditional still life paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the form of detailed realistic natural and handmade objects represented in these paintings, and the way in which the artist arranges their objects as a work of fiction for contemplation. The absence of the human form connects the audience with objects, in a similar way to a stage set, where familiar objects become a means for association and deception, and ultimately, reflection.

Chapter Four, The Nature of Things, presents a discourse on the philosophy of objects and ‘things’ found in nature, in an attempt to gain an understanding for the metaphysical as well as the physical: a thing can be an object, an idea, or a feeling. This chapter will discuss the hierarchical structures that have been developed to control nature, and the impact of predomination by human beings. It will also examine the representation of objects within the still life genre, and the historic significance of using objects to explore semiotic narratives. I will discuss this observation in detail, its origins, contemporary interpretations, and relate it back to my own art practice.

This chapter also looks at the phenomenon of collecting. Natural History and museum collections have evolved throughout history as a means of examining the natural and developing world close up – to study, draw,
dissect, and display. Collecting objects and materials for inclusion in my own artworks has played a significant role in their development and interpretation. This chapter will examine the still life genre as a ‘collection’ of objects, and the role that taxonomic systems of selection, order, and arrangement play in historical and contemporary interpretations of the still life genre. I discuss the work of contemporary Australian artists Jayne Dyer, Sue Pedley, Fiona Hall, and Ricky Swallow, and international artists Damien Hirst (United Kingdom), Mark Dion (United States of America), and Theo Mercier (France).

Through the examination of ‘the nature of things’, I explore the origins of modern philosophy pertaining to the understanding of nature, the things that we identify as natural, and man’s relationship to these objects. The observations I uncover and discuss, suggest that the traditional still life genre has a strong connection to the Age of Enlightenment, and the development of science through the examination of objects in nature. I consider the role of the artist as an educator and provocateur, who also examines the things that are found in nature, and collected, and later represented with other artificial objects to draw attention to their ‘essential’ qualities – the representation of life and death – and the feelings that these objects evoke.

Chapter Five, Silent Life, draws its title from a romanticised French interpretation of the name still life.\textsuperscript{5} Within this chapter I reflect on the final works produced for this project, including three exhibitions/installations, \textit{Silent River} (RMIT Project Space – Spare Room, 2011), \textit{Silent Night} (Craft Victoria, 2013), and \textit{Silent Life} (Geelong Gallery, 2014). All these installations explore notions of still life and landscape, which reference Australian ecology and environmental history: water usage, global warming, removal of native animal habitat, and species extinction.

Chapter Five also forms a conclusion to the written component of my exegesis; however, as a final chapter it does not form a summary of its contents. Instead I discuss how the culmination of the ideas, concepts, and questions I raise within the body of work I have produced, and the works of other artists and scholars throughout the ages, can help others to understand

\textsuperscript{5} C. Sterling, p.43.
the role that art can play in reminding them about the fragile existence of life on this planet.

The following chapters address my practice and its methodology as a sequence of exhibitions that reflect on ancient examples, traditional interpretations, and contemporary re interpretations of the still life genre. The aim of this research is to add to the body of knowledge that has been examined in the past, and hopefully one that will be added to in the future. By choosing a subject that is continually being re-examined in the context of fine art, I have attempted through the course of this exegesis, to reflect on ‘life’ in the twenty first century. In doing so, I hope that others will reflect on the artwork being presented, which addresses socio-political themes, and also examine their lives within the context of this work, including ecology and the management of the environment by a universal society.

The following research questions, which were formed on commencement of this PhD, have provided a structural framework for observation and analytical research.

1. How can I, within the context of the still life art genre, and through the use of hybrid craft-based techniques such as mixed media artworks and installation art, address socio/political issues on the environment and human ecology including the changing natural environment due to agriculture and urbanization?

2. How can everyday objects that are placed or represented within an artwork, impart a deeper level of meaning and act as complex signifiers for understanding the relationship that we, as human beings, have with the natural environment and the changing landscape, and help us to preserve and protect it?

3. How have contemporary artists sought to re-explore and redeem aspects of traditional still-life art, and re-interpret this theme to comment on current socio/political aspects of contemporary society?

6 Traditional still-life: European still-life painting (particularly Dutch still life) from the 17th and 18th centuries.
Introduction – addenda

CONTEXT

To put the work into context it is important to understand the landscape in which the work has been developed, as this is the location that has inspired many of the art works and writings, and is the location of the art studio where the works have been executed. This short addendum to my introduction includes photographs of my garden, studio and surrounding bush land where I have resided over the past fifteen years.

1. Boonah, view from house

Boonah is situated in south western Victoria, Australia, approximately 12 kilometers (as the cockatoo flies) from the Pacific Ocean and the Great Ocean Road, between the towns of Aireys Inlet and Lorne. Historically it was home to the Wathaurong Aboriginals, and later to pastoralists, who began clearing the land in the late 1800s.¹ A train line was built from Geelong to Forrest via Deans Marsh, to transport agricultural, timber, and mining produce, such as peas and potatoes, native hardwood, coal, and livestock, as well as tourists traveling to Lorne. Thus the area of Deans Marsh and its surrounds, including Bambra and Boonah, became accessible areas for settlement.

The two neighboring townlets of Bambra, meaning mushroom, and Boonah, meaning eel in the local Indigenous dialect (according to local knowledge), were initially cleared for their timber produce. Logging in the Otways, as the area is commonly referred to, continued up until 2004 when the area was declared a National Park. However, areas of state forest, and private land holdings, still exist in the region. Today the small parcels of rural land (between 20–100 acres) are mainly bought and developed as hobby farms, with a small number of commercially viable sheep and dairy/cattle farms. Other properties have been purchased by conservationists and have been regenerated with native hardwood timbers and understory plantings.

The property I acquired in 1998 is approximately 50 acres of steep, undulating, cleared farming land (originally blackwood, grey gum, mountain ash and manna gum forest), situated approximately 378 metres above sea level. The previous owner bought the property after the Ash Wednesday Fires in 1983, which swept through the area, destroying countless houses, livestock, and a number of human lives. The small weatherboard house that existed on the property burnt to the ground, and the owners, who had lived there for over fifty years, miraculously survived within an inch of being incinerated. The old house site – a concrete slab, bits of old pipe, and a concrete garden path leading up to a chain mail fence and gate – is
a reminder of the forces of nature, and its prevailing power over humankind. The adjacent forest is marked with large burnt out trees, standing like giant sentinels or tomb markers, in stark contrast to the surrounding revegetation of trees and understory plants.

This landscape is generally green and lush due to the high rainfall it receives. During the period in which I have inhabited the property, the amount of rainfall has noticeably diminished, but still receives a good measured metre and a half over the winter and spring seasons. Thus tree ferns and other ferns, mosses, lichens, and fungi find this landscape totally congenial to self-propagation and sustainability. Seasonal creeks are also a feature of this landscape, which can be heard gurgling along the gully fringes during the colder months of the year. By January these creeks have dried up to become rocky beds of forest detritus, bordering the now dry grass pastures and crisp tinder forests. During the spring the pasture and bush suddenly spring alive with introduced weeds and native creepers. Fresh regrowth and new saplings remind us that the landscape is living and constantly regenerating. Left to its own devices, without human intervention, the weeds and native plant life would eventually reclaim the pasture.

Images of property including studio and surrounding forest

3.1 View of studio and farm shed – exterior
3.2 Studio – interior

4.1 & 4.2 Bush land, Otways Forest Park

5.1 & 5.2 View of Boonah garden - introduced plant species
6.1 & 6.2 Indigenous birds
King parrot (mature male) / Magpies (immature)

7.1 State forest with introduced plants

7.2 Boonah garden with introduced plants
Studio and Exploration

8. Kiln packed with porcelain
9. Studio table exploring ideas

10. Collection of organic and hand-formed detritus

11.1 & 11.2 Exploring ideas for 1st project – The Unswept Floor, e.g.etal, 2007
Chapter One

By all accounts we have here a fully developed art of nature imitation, based on the sensory response to optical and tactile effects, and no doubt possessed of a suitable technique, vibrant and supple. Such an art presupposes an enthusiastic appreciation of nature, of forms and colors of objects, of light and its effects and qualities.

Charles Sterling, Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Present Time, 1959, p.10.
The ancient Greek mosaic, asarotos oikos, by Sosos of Pergamon, (second century BCE), commonly referred to as The Unswept Floor or The Unswept Room, has been described by many art historians as the most famous example of a still life dating from antiquity.¹ This intricate and detailed floor mosaic depicts scraps of food and detritus, complete with shadows and vermin, over a floor after an elaborate feast. There has been much discussion regarding this mosaic, which was later reproduced as a Roman copy in the second century CE by Heracleitus, and survives today in the Vatican Museum, Rome. [Fig.1] Art historian Sybille Ebert-Schifferer reflects on the ancient Greek, Hellenstic, and Etruscan custom to leave morsels and scraps on the floor as food for the dead:

The sepulchral aspect of Sosos’s frequently imitated ‘unswept room’ mosaic – like that of a Roman mosaic of a scull now in Naples – reflects another ancient custom, that of reminding diners of their mortality. (Erbet-Schifferer, 1999, p.18.)

Fig. 1 Heracleitus, ‘asarotos oikos’ (The Unswept Floor), second century AD

As a fashionable Roman copy (there are several variants of this mosaic), The Unswept Floor can also be interpreted as a display of excess and consumption

¹ Refer to footnote 1: Introduction.
by the wealthy. During the Roman Empire ostentatious public banquets, known as the epulum, were often held by the elite ruling class to show off their excessive wealth, and were offered to all the inhabitants of the city.²

The Unswept Floor has become a recurring theme in my artwork, and has manifested itself in many guises over the past six years, sometimes as the forest floor and at other times my studio floor, forest floor, garden path, country road, kitchen table, desk top etc. The inclusion of insignificant found objects, including organic detritus and objects found in my shed or local secondhand shops, which could easily be overlooked or regarded as waste, is paramount to my work. By collecting these objects, and presenting them as objects within an artwork, the viewer is forced to take a closer look, and ponder their new status. The theme of The Unswept Floor is a point of reference that in many ways anchors most of the artworks made within the duration of this exegesis, in a conscious effort to make a cohesive body of work for this extensive period of time.

There is no argument from art historians that the still life genre originated in antiquity in Greece, during the Hellenistic period (fourth century BCE). It reached its height in the third and second centuries BCE, and later developed in Roman times at the beginning of the first century CE in the guise of trompe l’oeil frescoes and mosaics.

Alongside Pompeii and Herculaneum, which were buried in ash from the Mount Vesuvius eruption in 79 CE, Stabiae, Rome, and in many parts of the Roman Empire from North Africa to the Rhine, mosaics and wall paintings dating from the first century BC to the fourth century CE, provide strong evidence for the early still life. It is believed that the fashion for trompe l’oeil, developed from ancient Greek theatre sets in approximately 400 BCE, led painters to mimic nature.³ Apollodoros is credited with inventing chiaroscuro, that interplay of light and shade combined with colour to make blended tones and shadows, which painters have taken for granted ever since. Using these devices it was

---

³ Sterling, p. 10.
possible to mimic objects, and create realist illusions and compositions that could fool even a bird.  

There are no examples of Greek paintings that have survived from the fourth century BCE; however, Pliny the Elder, the revered Roman officer and Greek scholar (who perished in the eruption of Vesuvius), recorded with great detail and exuberance descriptions of paintings from this period. He tells us:

... the most famous Greek ‘with the brush in a minor style of painting’ was Piraikos ... to be ranked below few painters in skill; it is possible that he won distinction by his choice of subjects, in as much as although adopting a humble line he attained in that field the height of glory. He painted barbers’ shops and cobbler’s stalls, asses, viands and the like, consequently receiving a Greek name meaning ‘painter of sordid subjects’; in these however he gives exquisite pleasure, and indeed they fetched bigger prices than the largest works of any master. (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia.*)

Art Historian Charles Sterling qualifies this by stating, ‘These were probably small easel pictures on wood, fitted with folding shutters, such as were later represented in trompe l’oeil wall paintings of Pompeii and Rome.’ (Sterling, p.9.)

Thus the still life painting or genre, as we know it today, was born from humble origins, to mimic objects that were used everyday, and make note of their every detail including colour, texture, light, and shadow. Objects which were ordinary,
and usually overlooked, perhaps even sordid, represented realistically to make sense of, or confirm our existence in the world, are a reminder to us of our mortality.

At this time the term ‘still life’ had not be coined. However, the concept of reproducing and arranging inanimate objects, in such as way as to create an illusion or ‘mimesis’ of natural and human made objects, is paramount to the genre. I will discuss this observation in further detail in Chapter 3: Mimesis.

This exegesis begins with a small-scale installation artwork at e.g. etal, Melbourne, 2007.⁷ [Fig. 2-3] This exhibition was an opportunity to produce the first project/exhibition for this PhD, which would look at relationships between handmade porcelain organic objects and found organic ephemeral detritus which I had sourced from my two living environments in Victoria.⁸

In this installation artwork, there are five small works of various sizes that form one narrative work titled ‘The Unswept Floor’. Each work is enigmatically titled through suggestion: Daniel’s Heart; of Life and Love; Blowing in the Wind; of the Earth, Sea and Sky; and Swirling Around.

---

⁷ e.g. etal is a contemporary jewellery gallery in Melbourne. This work was exhibited in a small exhibition space in its Collins Street Store.

⁸ The two places I lived during this period of time are Boonah, south west Victoria, and Middle Park, Melbourne, Australia.
Although this exhibition was relatively insignificant, both in scale and venue, this artwork explores complex ideas about ephemerality and permanency. The objects were arranged in my own taxonomic order according to their size, colour, and form, to ‘poetically’ describe the relationship between objects in nature. The fragments of pale blue painted timber on which the objects rest remind us of the sky, a pure void in which they exist in the world – not grounded by the floor or ground, but suggestive of gently floating within the space above. The ephemeral objects had been selected and preserved – their symbolism reflected in the titles of the individual works. While the organic pieces of detritus will eventually cease to exist, the white, bone-like high-fired porcelain objects, can survive forever. The inscription behind the installation reads as an epitaph: ‘At the end of the day all that remains is the ‘trace’ on the unswept floor’.

This artwork draws on the simplicity and understatement of the original mosaic floor, focusing on the representational imitation of nature and objects that are usually discarded as ephemeral waste. By dividing the floor into fragments, the objects are able to form a new sense of order within a defined space, and be read as part of a narrative or poem. “Tell me a tale ‘of Life and Love’ … the answer my friend, is ‘Blowing in the Wind’ …”

9 I have used the term poetic in this instance to describe a composition of forms, with the intention of forming a visual poem, a composition that has rhythm, emotional content, and abstract interpretation. The key to the poem lies in its title, and the use of imagery, which have been chosen for their symbolism.
Following this initial exhibition, I began to collect more and more objects of detritus from my garden and the forest floor of the surrounding bush. The objects I collected included plant material, such as leaves and seed pods, twigs and lichen, and animal detritus, such as dead insects, reptiles and amphibians, nests, shells, and bones. I attempted to preserve these ephemeral objects for future usage.

The Gum leaves I collected were preserved with a bondcrete silicon sealant compound combined with water. This gave the leaves a slightly ‘waxy’ finish and stopped the leaves from deteriorating by retaining moisture in the leaves. Most items were preserved through a slow drying process in cardboard or wooden boxes away from UV light. These containers were fumigated at the same time to further preserve the objects. All of these methods were effective, and many of the objects were still in the same condition several years later. UV tests on the leaves exposed to direct sunlight over six months show that the sealant does not stop the leaves from losing their colour, but is still effective in maintaining their freshness and some residual colour in some cases.

I also collected small human-made objects I found in the surrounding area, including pieces of chain, bottles, tins, string, rope, wire, and an assortment of metal farm objects which belonged to old machinery, tools, or fencing materials. I tried to avoid collecting objects that were not connected to the environment of Boonah and its surrounding area. Some miscellaneous objects were given to me, others purchased for farm and garden related activities, and a handful purchased or borrowed from local secondhand stores.

Simultaneously, I continued to make small hand-formed pieces of organic detritus from porcelain. These objects varied in size, between 1 and 20 centimetres, and although resembling many of the objects I collected, were in fact fictitious or made from memory. Each object and project is unique. The exhibitions that followed are made from these components. After each de-installation the objects were packed as a new collection of objects, and in some cases the components were recycled and re-used in new art works. This idea of recycling connects with concepts about regeneration, and giving objects a new identity and life through making and exhibiting art.
A contemporary example of an artwork utilising the framing suggested by *The Unswept Floor* is an installation by Gabriel Orozco, *Asterisms* (2012), [Fig.4] including two collections of detritus, comprising thousands of items the artist had collected from two sites in the Americas. I closely identify with this artwork of Orozco, who has collected found objects from specific locations, and then organised them within the context of an artwork to make a statement about place and ecology.

The first site is a playing field near his home in New York. This installation, *Astroturf Constellations*, [Fig. 5] a collection of nearly 1200 objects, exists on a micro level. The objects are tiny: pieces of string, bobby pins, plastic clips, pieces of wire, feathers, paper wrappers, chewing gum etc. They are spread out in a table size vitrine (100x120x120cm). The detritus is arranged according to colour, type, size, and shape and Orozco’s own taxonomic classification and sense of order.

The second site was a beach on a protected marine reserve, a sand island in Baja California Sur, Mexico, which is a site where whales come to breed, give birth, and die. It is also a natural repository for commercial and industrial
waste from across the Pacific Ocean. This installation, **Sandstars**, also a collection of 1200 objects, is on a macro scale. It is laid out on the floor, like a colourful carpet of plastic containers, buoys, rope, bottles, light bulbs, timber, and hundreds of miscellaneous human-made and organic objects, which have all been weathered from the ocean. The works have again been set out according to size, type, and colour.

Both the collections have been photographed systematically as twelve large-scale gridded images, each comprising 99 images of 100mm (10x11 rows), with the objects compartmentalised within the overall image. [Fig. 6] A thirteenth image shows the work in situ. These two sets of photographs were stretched along opposite walls of the long linear gallery of the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin in 2012. The micro and macro have both been photographed at the same scale and within the context of this exhibition faced each other as equals. The installations occupied the space in between.

---

In this exhibition the micro and macro installations, objects, and images, play against each other. They both describe an absent landscape, which includes human-made waste, which has been haphazardly discarded – objects trivial and sordid – given a new status as fine art. We are able to observe the individual objects close up, as a reflection of ourselves, consumers of things, which once had value, now discarded. *The Unswept Floor* is a sound metaphor for this contemporary artwork.

Formerly I specialised in the production of handmade tiles and architectural ceramics, including wall murals and ceramic relief collages, and ceramic paintings. These artworks often reflected my interest in architecture and architectural features – details of courtyard walls, staircases, and ruins. This subject became the focus of my Masters by Research in 1992-95. Thus it is not surprising that I have been drawn to such a masterful piece of tiled art in the form of a Greek-Roman mosaic, which is rendered in exquisite colours, shaded with tiny pieces of stone to form a delightful composition of objects, that one would normally find distasteful – a mouse, fish bone, crustacean, a bird’s claw, nuts, shells etc. However, it is an artwork of extreme beauty, and not a wonder that Pliny was drawn to it and wrote so eloquently and admiringly about it.¹¹

---

December 2005

I recall an afternoon several years ago walking down the orange dirt road outside my property in Boonah. The leaves on the road suddenly appeared before me as exquisite brightly coloured forms everywhere I turned. In this epiphany, I collected as many leaves as I could carry back to my house where I washed and laid them out on the kitchen table. For years I had walked down this road, never taking a second glance. Suddenly I realised the beauty in the detritus, which presented itself to me thereafter, every time I walked out the door. On this December afternoon I photographed these leaves and then preserved them by sealing them and storing them in a box away from UV light. On several occasions I have used these leaves in photographic works, ‘Silver Bower’ (2008) and mixed media compositions ‘Mimesis’ and ‘Garden Series I & II’ (2008), and as test panels, ‘Leaves in six movements’ (2005), which I hung in my hallway in front of a window to test the discolouration from UV light over time.

While the title ‘The Unswept Floor’ was only used for the 2007 exhibition/project, and a small series of artwork in ‘Mimesis’ (2008), later works can also be framed within this founding aspect of still life. As a sequence of projects they can be read as:

Project 1: The Unswept Floor (2007) – Chapter 1
Project 2: Land and Identity (2007) – Chapter 2
Project 3: Notions of Still Life and Landscape (2007) – Chapter 2
Project 4: Mimesis (2008) – Chapter 3
Project 5: The Nature of Things (2009) – Chapter 4
Project 6: Still Life with Books (2009) – Chapter 2
Project 7: Black Bower (2010) – Chapter 2
Project 8: Re-collections (2011) – Chapter 4
Project 9: Silent River (2011) – Chapter 5
Project 10: XS (2011) – Chapter 5
Project 11: Silent Night (2013) – Chapter 5
Project 12: Silent Life (2014) – Chapter 5

Still life art has always been a contentious and debated subject regarding its artistic status. In the seventeenth century the French Academy relegated it to the bottom of its hierarchical list of importance, below history, religious, and
portrait painting. This view was widespread, even in ancient times as Pliny attests to, when the Greek term *rhypography* was used to describe insignificant objects and *rhyparography*, painting of the sordid, as opposed to *megalography*, or large-scale, grand painting. The mosaic of *The Unswept Floor* is an excellent example of *rhypography* and *rhyparography*. In Norman Bryson’s publication on still life painting, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Bryson outlines the need to look closely at the objects, and their arrangements, to understand the underlying message embedded in the work. By challenging and changing our perception of what we perceive as ordinary or insignificant, we search for a deeper narrative and question the significance of the objects and the role that they play in our lives.

The term still life, or *still-leven*, first appeared in Dutch inventories in the mid-seventeenth century to describe a painting with a motionless model. The word still can be translated as ‘motionless’, and the word for life or nature – leven – simply meant ‘model’. This descriptive title helped to distinguish paintings from subjects that were moving, such as figures or animals. The interpretation of these words into other European languages, to describe all inanimate objects, including those which were dead, soon became romantically interpreted by the French as ‘silent life’ and eventually *nature morte*, which literally translates as dead life. I will discuss the significance of these descriptive titles in my final chapter, Silent Life.

During the fourteenth century in Italy, still lifes were depicted on church altar panels as exquisitely detailed wooden inlay of marquetry. This inlaid work closely resembled some of the Roman mosaics and fresco wall paintings found in Pompeii, and are seen as the continuum of these still life works. These inlays, depicting objects symbolically ‘touched by Christ’, were displayed on the outside of the cabinets which were open during church service and therefore could only be viewed when the cabinet was closed. It is believed that these altar panels were fairly widespread across Europe and have been found in regions bordering on the Northern Alps.

---

12 A. Lowenthal, p. 8.
13 C. Sterling, p.11.
15 C. Sterling, p.43.
16 Both Sterling and Grimms agree on this.
There has been much debate by historians about their origins, and why the genre spread simultaneously throughout the rest of Europe. Sterling credits Taddeo Gaddi (1337 or 1338) with still lifes that decorate the Baroncelli Chapel at Santa Croce in Florence, which he believes were derived from Roman mosaics and fresco wall paintings found in Pompeii:

In two simulated niches, each divided in two by a shelf, we find objects of liturgical use: bread, paten, perfume jar and cruets, in one; a candlestick in a basin and a prayer book, in the other. These simulated niches, painted in trompe-l’oeil, serve to replace the real niches in which liturgical objects were customarily placed, and which were a common feature of Gothic chapels. (Sterling, p.18)

During the seventeenth century the still life genre, which we recognise today, as a ‘highbrow’ painting art form, developed across Europe. In her monumental study, Still Life a History (1999), Sybille Ebert-Schifferer outlines a step-by-step timeline of the stages of development in the still life genre – which she states is not continuous:

The history of still life, a genre uniquely poised between reality and illusion is by no means continuous over long periods of time and in certain regions the tradition was forgotten. (Ebert-Schifferer, p.12.)

What is interesting about the development of still life in the seventeenth century is that it appears to have blossomed simultaneously across Europe, into a sophisticated form of art that had outgrown its humble rhypographic origins, and morphed into something much grander. [Fig. 7]

At about this time (1606), vases of flowers appear in the Netherlands and Italy. Caravaggio had painted the much-admired ‘Carafe with Flowers’ with the transparency of the water and the glass with the reflection of the window of a room.

17 C. Sterling pp. 17-18, 41-43.
18 Although not all European paintings from the seventeenth century are painted in the elaborate style of many of the Dutch and Flemish artists, there is no doubt that the market was intended for wealthy art collectors, and that much of the content of the paintings depicts the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie, who could afford these paintings. A notable exception is the work of Spanish painter, Juan Sánchez Cotán, who painted ‘monastic’ still lifes, and some of the more simplistic representations of bowls of fruit, such as the works of Adriaen Coote and early works of Caravaggio.
Tables with banquets also begin to appear at this time in Haarlem (1610). It is not clear when Caravaggio was exposed to the works produced in the North or visa versa, as Caravaggio clearly influenced these painters also, for example, van Dijck. (Ebert-Schifferer, p.87)

According to Ebert-Schifferer, the earliest vanitas still life was painted even earlier, in 1603 by a Dutch scholar, Jacques de Gheyn the Younger (1565-1629):19

The majority of his oeuvre consists of designs for engravings, frequently dealing with the complex subject matter of emblems. In his oil painting, de Gheyn takes up the motif of the soap bubble, familiar from a number of earlier allegorical engravings. It symbolised Homo Bulla, that is, humanity, which vanishes like the ephemeral product of a child’s play … It appears quite solid, and it seems much too substantial to be a mere soap bubble, floating above a skull in the sort of niche we already know from the memento mori paintings on the backs of portraits [refer Barthel Bruyn the Elder, 1524, Vanitas Still Life on the back of a portrait of a woman, there is an inscription from Horace’s Epistlae: Everything disintegrates with death; death is the end of things. Like the standard vanitas motif of the skull, the quotation was meant to remind the person portrayed that beauty and wealth, like all earthly things, are transitory]. (p.34) Reflected in it [the soap bubble], are symbols of worldly power and pleasures: a crown and scepter, war trophies, glasses, and dice. The coins in front of the niche suggest worldly wealth, the vases and tulip the evanescence of earthly beauty. (Ebert-Schifferer, p. 86.)

At a time of increased abundance and commercial trade at the beginning of the seventeenth century up until 1660, the Netherlands had become the richest nation the world had seen.20

---

19 Vanitas still life paintings use symbolism, such as the skull and snuffed out candle to reflect on the transitory nature of life, mortality and salvation.
20 N. Bryson, p. 98.
Its economy was still pre-industrial, a primarily commercial empire deriving its immense wealth from trade, its near monopoly on European shipping, its colonial possessions in the East and West Indies, the success of its banks and stock exchange in Amsterdam, and the energy of its small population. (Bryson, pp.88-99.)

The Reformation also played a significant role in its abundance of wealth, diverting funds into the public purse, instead of the church or monarchy, as was the case in other European countries at this time. This accumulation of wealth brought about the desire to buy luxury handmade objects, including paintings. Exotic flowers were also highly sought after; most notably tulips, imported from Turkey, which were considered prized possessions and symbols of wealth, and whose bulbs were even traded on the stock exchange. Fresh fruit and vegetables, shell fish and meat products, spices and sugar were also items of food that found their way onto banquet tables for the first time. This produce was depicted in the Dutch still life paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a celebration of this newfound wealth. Many authorities on the subject of still life believe the works have layers of meaning beneath the surface with the objects depicting hidden symbolism, often carrying ideas opposite to the object's surface appearance. For example, life in these paintings alludes to death, beauty, greed and vanity. The term vanitas was used to reflect mortality through objects: coins, books, music, and floral arrangements were all
considered to be objects of vanity and futile in the face of death.\textsuperscript{21} This is the paradox of still life art. Flowers, fruit, and dead animals were symbols of the transitory nature of life and also a reminder that to lust after such things was ‘detrimental to a person’s spiritual well being’.\textsuperscript{22} Thus the idea of vanity is reiterated through these works, which provided a means of ‘self reflection’: a humanistic lesson for educated people who could understand the meaning inherent in the painting and also appreciate the artwork for its aesthetic appearance.\textsuperscript{23}

In most cases the message suggests that the accumulation of wealth through profit is a mere vanity as we live with the prospect of death. The reinvestigation of these paintings and their significance to life in the twenty-first century suggests that the growth of capitalism, the luxuries that can be afforded through the accumulation of wealth, and the way in which these funds are accrued and distributed, are of similar concern as they were four centuries ago. As the world grapples with economic ‘bubbles’ which appear to be precarious, the consequences of capitalism, such as the growth of resource industries like mining and timber, also create concerns for the ecology of Earth. I will discuss this subject in further detail in Chapter 5.

Plants, in particular flowers, are a symbol of the transitory nature of life and were adopted by painters of seventeenth century Dutch still life paintings as vanitas. [Fig. 8] Within these paintings, flowers that do not belong together due to seasonal or regional differences are often combined in one magnificent display. Han-Michael Herzog, in his introduction to \textit{The Floral Still Life: The Art of the Flower}, states:

The presentation of nature torn from its surroundings and transferred to a new, artificially arranged context is always associated with the desire to participate in nature and its beauty. It reflects the centuries-old wish to appropriate and possess nature: a longing that nevertheless does not seek to capture ‘pure’ or ‘wild’ nature but is intent instead upon achieving acculturation, the domestication of nature.

(Herzog p. 3)

\textsuperscript{21} N. Schneider, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 71.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 17.
Within my artworks, the use of ephemeral plant material, and the handmade elements which explore a variety of plant forms, including flowers, seed pods, and other ‘organic’ representations derived from nature, also symbolically act as vanitas. The combination of the preserved detritus, juxtaposed with the white, bone-like porcelain forms incorporated into my artwork, act as a reminder of the fragile and ephemeral nature of life.

Flowers also have obvious associations with sexuality, which due to the sexual conservatism of the seventeenth century were overlayed with spiritual symbolism, or a warning about the consequences regarding temptations of the soul. In the twentieth century, artists such as Georgia O’Keefe, Robert Mapplethorpe, Helen Chadwick, and Fiona Hall were renowned for their use of erotic symbolism applied to the floral still life.

Although not outwardly, or overtly sexual, many of the forms I have produced for my artworks, are deliberately sensuous, and evocative of female and male genitalia. The ‘pod’ forms that I have been producing since 2000, reference ‘forbidden fruit’; and the concept of the Garden of Eden harks back to my

24 No two forms are the same. However, there are similar forms that have been developed through the repetition of making. The organic representations are often morphed forms, and many are zoomorphic in appearance.
Catholic upbringing. These references appear more deliberately in the artworks *Mimesis* (2008), notable in the works of *The Unswept Floor* series, [Fig. 9] whereby pieces of porcelain and ephemeral detritus are placed on close up images of the elaborate marble floor of the Basilica San Marco, Venice, a place I had visited as a nineteen year old art student. I was drawn to the idea of forming my own unswept floor upon the ‘mimesis’ of this grand church floor – symbolic of my sexual awakening, and loss of innocence, which along with my religious upbringing, had been swept away in my late teens.

The flower form has played a significant role in my work since 2004, when I explored the form of the Arum lily in a series of hand-built porcelain vase forms, for an exhibition at the Lorne Art Gallery, ‘Lily’ (2004). My interest in the Arum lily is two fold, as an object of feminine beauty with obvious sexual overtones, and as one of the first flowering plants in my garden in the early spring and a potent symbol for new life. Originally from South Africa, it is also considered an invasive weed in the Otways, and other parts of Australia. I have photographed the Arum lily extensively and never ceased to be amazed by the visual sexuality of this seductive plant. In 2009 I began to photograph the agapanthus, another indigenous species to South Africa. In my artwork, *Agapanthus* (2009), [Fig. 10] a bright orange gum leaf rests within the purple flower head. Below, in the understory of the plant, a collection of porcelain and terracotta snake like forms,

---

25 These floor tiles of various colour, shape and patterning, also resonated and connected me to my past as a tile maker, which I had developed in the final year of my undergraduate degree in 1983.
reminiscent of the agapanthus tendrils, entwine as though mating. In the top right corner, a (dead) dragonfly hovers above the plant, and recalls A Vase of Flowers (1663), by Willem van Aelst, of tulips, poppies, irises and peonies.  

[Fig.11] The agapanthus is also considered an invasive weed in rural Victoria and thus the juxtaposition of gum leaf and ‘introduced’ species of flowering plant raises issues of identity and place, not unlike van Aelst’s painting. Left to seed, these plants could grow out of control through the native bush land and waterways if not eradicated or controlled. Fortunately these plants are dead-headed annually before their seed heads have properly formed.

The traditional *vanitas* symbol of the skull also appears on a regular basis in contemporary art. Sculptors Ricky Swallow, Damien Hirst, and Fiona Hall have all claimed this symbol to examine socio-political concerns, and place the human within their otherwise human-less compositions; in Swallow’s case it is usually himself.  

[Fig.12] Chadwick also adopted several *vanitas* symbols, including the soap bubble, bruised fruit, fallen petals, and moulted feather as symbols of mutability, fragility, and the fleeting life of man.

---

27 Swallow’s sculptures are often self reflective, noticeable in *Everything is Nothing*, 2003, depicting a small chip in the front tooth of a skull, matching his own.
I have avoided using the image of the human skull in my work as a *vanitas* symbol, which is perhaps the most overused icon in contemporary and commercial artwork. There is no doubt as to the power of this iconography, which is easily identifiable as the personification of death and mortality. However, I have not shied away from using the bones and skulls of animals, which I have uncovered on my property on a regular basis. For me the death of an animal is poignant, and finding a place for them in my artworks allows me to honor their existence in life and death. [Fig.13]
The transformation of the still life genre as we recognise it today coincides with the period known as the Enlightenment (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), and its quest for scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{29} It is also noteworthy that at this point in time artists had the technical skills required to confidently render nature in oil paint. Patrons of the arts and intellectuals were also able to appreciate these paintings for their complex symbolism and aesthetic triumphs.\textsuperscript{30} For the first time objects were able to stand alone, without human support, or narrative, as they had been previously depicted within the context of history, religious, and allegorical painting.

Still life painting was the perfect vehicle to practice painting skills. By working directly from nature, an artist's skill was put to the test, through painting the detail of plants and animals in an exquisite hyper realistic state: the fur on a rabbit, the feathers on a pheasant, the veins of a leaf, the translucency of a petal, the texture of a tablecloth. Seen for example in Christoffel van den Berghe's \textit{Still Life with Dead Birds} (1624), [Fig. 14] and Jan van Huysum's \textit{Fruit Piece} (1722). [Fig. 8]

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig14.png}
\caption{Christoffel van den Berghe's, \textit{Still Life with Dead Birds}, 1624}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{29} The Age of Enlightenment as a cultural movement of intellectuals (philosophes) and scientists in the 17th and 18th centuries, spread across Europe, the United Kingdom and America. This coalition led by the great scientific philosophers including Rene Descartes, Galileo Galilei and Francis Bacon gave science 'the sanction of reason', which had formally taken the word of the early naturalists and sophists, such as Aristotle, as the definitive truth. P. Gay, \textit{Age of Enlightenment}, New York, Silver Burdett Co., 1966, p. 11-16.
\textsuperscript{30} S. Ebert-Schifferer p. 91.
\end{footnotesize}
These are tactile paintings that require close attention to detail, by both the artist and the observer. The artist must have the ability to heighten our senses of sight, taste, and smell, to draw us in so we can linger inside these paintings as the spectator – the absent human, who has just entered the room, after the last one has exited. This attention to detail is a device that is not lost in the contemporary still life, particularly in the artworks I will discuss within the context of this exegesis. The reinvigoration of traditional craft based practices, that require a high degree of skill and expertise, and often time and patience, become vehicles for drawing the viewer into the work. These skills are notable in the works of Fiona Hall, Louise Weaver and Ricky Swallow.

During the eighteenth century, traditional still life was still a mainstream practice and artists such as Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750) and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779) are highly regarded for their contributions to the still life genre, and for their skill and innovative styles of work. It is noteworthy that Chardin, whose delicate textured style of painting (a precursor to impressionism), was not recognised in his time, and that Rachel Ruysch was one of a handful of women artists who was accepted into this primarily male dominated profession. Ruysch painted woodland still lifes, which included amphibians and reptiles, as well as floral still lifes. I will discuss the artwork of Rachel Ruysch in further detail in Chapter 2: Notions of Still Life and Landscape.

Contemporary Still Life as we see and understand it today, has grown out of the modernist still life of the twentieth century, which has its roots in the late nineteenth century, notably in the artworks of Van Gogh, Goya, and the French Impressionist painters, including Cezanne, Manet, Monet, Fantin-Latour and Rousseau. Cezanne is credited with ‘lighting the fuse’, which would change the concept of still life being solely dependent on mimesis.

The paintings and collages of Picasso, and fellow cubist artists Braque and Gris, are the protagonists of the modernist still life. Collage created a new dimension to the genre, which included newspaper cuttings and textured papers, creating an effect of relief and a feeling of urgency. They are reflective

31 ‘Unlike the versatitle, overworked Oudry, who was courted by all the Princes of Europe, Chardin would attain only modest wealth.’ S. Ebert-Sheifferer, p. 245.
32 S. Ebert- Shiferrer, p. 250.
of a period of time just prior to, and during World War I (1914–18), when artists and writers philosophised about art and politics within the confines of cafes, ‘where “smokers” accessories, distinctively shaped bottles and glasses for the consumption of wines and spirits, and folded and unfolded newspaper, signify the multiple and quickly shifting settings of the bistro table and the desires and appetites of a transient clientele’ (Rowell, p. 47). Picasso began creating three dimensional constructed collages of still lifes in 1913, which incorporated found and discarded objects, such as pieces of timber, tin, haberdashery, sheet metal, and wire. At the same time, Matisse was developing his own unique style of art – moving away from the muted tones of the cubists towards a style that was colourful, bold, and stylised, with distorted perspectives. Duchamp had also begun to question contemporary art at this time through the displacement of objects, marked by his early ready-made objects in 1913 and 1914, which would later align him with the Dada group of artists who displaced and recontextualised objects within the context of still life.

The twentieth century, whichever way it is viewed, cannot be recalled as a ‘still’ time. The pace with which society has developed technically and socially, overlaid with war, famine, and natural disasters, leaves behind a century of unrest. That the genre of still life could reflect this condition as stillness is debatable.

Fig. 15 Pablo Picasso, Still Life, 1914

Image deleted / copyright permission pending

33 An example of this is Picasso’s Mandolin and Clarinet, c.1913, construction of painted wood and pencil marks, collection of Musée Picasso, Paris.
34 An example of this is Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel, 1913, assemblage: metal wheel mounted on painted stool. (original lost- reproduced in 1951), collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Bottlerack, 1914, readymade: galvanized-iron bottle dryer (original lost – reproduced in 1964), collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
When we view works of Western artists who were active in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Picasso, Braque and Leger, we see intense brush strokes and discordant compositions and/or colours; a reflection of their time through self expression and experimentation against the backdrop of social and political chaos. [Fig.16] The symbols of the seventeenth century vanitas paintings are still evident in their works – the skull, fruit, flowers, and extinguished candles, all potent symbols of life during and between the wars. However, newspapers have replaced the ‘books of knowledge’ and in place of expensive crockery there is rustic tableware, but the message is still the same.

![Picasso, Still Life with Skull, Leeks and Pitcher, 1945](image)

In the latter half of the twentieth century most of the traditional symbols of still life had been replaced by a new consumer culture associated with capitalism and ‘peacetime’ prosperity. The Pop artists in America and Europe were of a generation concerned with the realities of modern urban life, including advertising and waste. Artists such as Robert Rauschenburg, Jasper Johns, and Claus Oldenburg led a revolution by challenging conceptual and aesthetic notions of art, showing little respect for traditional conventions and following the lineage of Marcel Duchamp with his ‘ready-made’ sculptures at the beginning of the twentieth century. Johns chose to create his own fiction by mimicking objects and questioning the function and materiality of his subjects. Rauschenburg on the other hand, used actual materials such as recycled detritus, which he
reused and combined with other abandoned objects, often defacing or painting over them. European artist Arman also reflected the subject of consumerism in his sculptures of trash in Plexiglas boxes titled Human Trashcan (1960) and The Gorgon’s Shield (1962), the latter being a collage of accumulated silver painted dog combs.35 Daniel Spoerri created ‘trap pictures’, which involved gluing down actual objects found in chance positions, such as Prose Poems (1959), which contain pieces of white crockery, an empty wine bottle and wine glass, an ash tray full of cigarette butts, a scrunched up piece of brown paper, and a book of prose, sitting on a wooden tray. [Fig. 17] This hangs vertically on the wall at the Tate Modern, London, behind a Perspex vitrine. Rather than idealising the new slick commodities complete with packaging and advertising, combined with aggressive colour and repetitive styling designed to entice a mass audience to buy, these artists have reduced them to effigies of household waste. They also questioned the purpose of art and shocked its audience by providing a surreal context for the work, and thus created a self-reflective device not dissimilar to the traditional vanitas.

Sculptors Tony Cragg, Rosalie Gascoigne, and Louise Bourgeois also began using found and discarded objects in their work in the late 1970s and early 1980s to create installation still life works. They looked at the possibilities of whole floors and walls becoming the new canvas for still life.

For example *Dipped Objects* (1981), by Tony Cragg, uses eight painted objects: two pieces of wood, a briefcase, a glass bottle, a bag, a metal ring, a tin can, and a piece of stone, half dipped in white paint and arranged in a linear configuration diagonally across the floor. [Fig.18] The discarded object taken out of its context as waste or detritus, has been given a new identity, once abandoned, now new. These artists saw the beauty in the texture and form of the objects, and the possibilities for their accumulated collections of materials, arranged in various and numerous configurations, creating a new identity and respect for the abandoned ‘useless’ items positioned in their artwork.

This fascination for presenting and mimicking objects, particularly on a life size scale, not only draws the viewer into the artwork, but also allows them to interact with the work on a physical scale – to enter the stage. Norman Bryson describes this phenomenon when discussing ancient Greek and Roman mosaics and *trompe l’oeil*:

In the case of the floor mosaic the effect of fictional space is perhaps even stronger than in the case of the wall, in that the viewer is physically in contact with the plane which demarcates the boundary of the fictive space: walking directly upon (or within) it, rather than contemplating it across an interval. (Bryson, p. 34.)
Within the above examples of the still life genre, spanning several centuries, are the foundations for still life in the twenty first century. Many art historians such as Ebert-Shifferer and Norbet Schneider have written on traditional and twentieth century still life, and each has divided the genre into groups and sub groups for the purposes of trying to understand its origins and identity. How do we define a still life artwork today, and what are the signifiers of the genre which can be reinterpreted and represented in other mediums which were non-existent before the twentieth century as recognisable forms of art? The answers to these questions will define in part the content of this exegesis; however, as an artist seeking to contextualise my own artwork and research, the chapters which follow, that is, the descriptive titles to my exhibitions and the artworks which they contain, have in many ways formed both the methodology for my practice and the methodology for my research. The re-interpretation of the still life genre provides me, the author, certain liberties, which perhaps the artists that I cite as examples did not intend. It also provides me, as an artist, with the opportunity to re-interpret the genre, outside the area of traditional perceptions.

The linking of ecology with still life locates the genre within the twenty first century. Since the latter half of the twentieth century (1970-1999), there has been a growing desire, particularly in the Western world, to protect the environment and preserve the natural ecology (or what remains of it) from human-made destruction in the name of economic and technical progress. These concerns have been the subject of political debate, and as such fall into the area of socio-political examination within the context of the still life genre as a vehicle for raising awareness of the fragility of life, and human kind’s quest to preside over nature, to the detriment of a social conscience or soul, as suggested by the original interpretation. By connecting the genre to Wunderkammer cabinets and museum collections, the definition of still life has been broadened to include actual objects to replace the realistic and represented objects of the traditional and modern painted still life. My aim is to draw these comparisons and justify their place within the genre of still life, and also demonstrate that there is a socio-political movement in art of the twenty first century that relates to ecology.
Artists in the twenty first century such as Fiona Hall and Mark Dion are taking up the challenge of being proactive in this debate. The ‘Objects of Desire’, as so eloquently described by Margit Rowell (1997), are being morphed into political narratives, which have relevant social content, as well as being ‘desirable’ objects.

This chapter, The Unswept Floor, begins with a beautiful mosaic of ancient origin, perhaps describing the remnants of a Greek feast after a night of excessive consumption by the wealthy minority of Athens. The ‘unswept floor’ is a symbol within the still life genre for highlighting our needs as individuals, to question the status quo, and question our relationship with the things in life that often appear insignificant. It is also a symbol for the things we 'sweep under the carpet', in a hope that they will go away, and we can forget about them. It is a symbol for metaphors of our existence, in the hope that they will stay in our consciousness, and help us address the things in life that are important in maintaining a moral code of equality and fairness.
Notions of Still life and Landscape

Chapter Two

Ecology is the mysterious work of providing a home for the soul, one that is felt in the very depth of the heart. Once we have the imagination that sees home in such a profound and far-reaching sense, protection of the environment will follow, for ecology is a state of mind, an attitude, and a posture that begins at the very place you find yourself this minute and extends to places you will never see in your lifetime.

This chapter introduces my rationale for making artworks about concepts pertaining to ‘still life and landscape’. At first glance the title Notions of Still Life and Landscape, might appear to be a paradox, as we have traditionally understood still life to represent inanimate objects that have been reproduced on tables. During the eighteenth century there were in fact a small group of artists who painted forest still life, portraying the stumps of trees covered in vines or flowers, surrounded by amphibians, reptiles, and insects. These works coincided with the growing number of private natural history collections (curiosity cabinets), and interest in botanical and anatomical science. [Fig. 19]

![Fig. 19 Wunderkammer collection, reconstruction of an 18th century study room, Ottoneum, Kassel, Germany](image)

Dutch still life artist, Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750), the daughter of a famous anatomist and botanist,¹ had exceptional skills at painting forest still lifes (as well as the more traditional floral still life), and is one of a small handful of women from this period to be accepted within this male dominated fraternity.²

¹ Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731), Professor of Anatomy and Botany, Amsterdam, was famous for his technique of embalming specimens. He also owned one of the most impressive collections of specimens and ‘cabinets of curiosities’ in the Netherlands, which became one of the tourist attractions of Amsterdam. ‘Visitors could admire his compositions of allegorical scenes, in which the skeletons of foetuses were placed on “rocks” of kidney and bladder stones and set amidst blood vessels inflated to look like tiny trees.’ Kooijmans, L., *Online Dictionary of Dutch Women: Ruysch, Rachel* http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/Ruysch%2C%20Rachel/en, updated 13 Jan 2014, (accessed 7 March 2014).

² This small group of women artist included Rachel’s sister Anna Ruysch, Clara Peters, Judith Leyster, Michaëlina Woutiers and Maria van Oosterwijk.
Influenced by the Dutch artist Otto Marseus van Schrieck and his pupil Willem van Aelst, Ruysch was able to capture the feeling of stepping into dark woodland to observe nature close up. [Fig. 20 & 21] The subjects of the painting were illuminated against a very dark background, and are described by Norbet Schneider (1999): ‘They have a luminous quality which seems to come from within them’ (p.67). No doubt her background enabled her to be well versed in anatomy and entomology, as she was able paint her subjects in intricate detail and accuracy. Schnieder records of this work that ‘despite her education, she alludes to the theory of antiquity whereby insects are brought forth by decay, without seed, and in her art seems to be coming out of the decaying undergrowth’ (pp. 196-7). Within the context of this period of time, these forest still lifes must be viewed in terms of their Christian symbolism, with a close relationship to the vanitas. A reminder of the garden of good and evil, these still lifes, devoid of human form, also connect with a ‘new’ awareness and fascination of nature, which forms part of the Enlightenment period of discovery.

In the second decade of the twenty first century, environmental concerns are a relatively new area of socio-political interest – it was not until the 1970s that the first object based works relating to nature, capitalism, and the environment
first began to appear on the art scene.\textsuperscript{3} Environmental themes form a large part of contemporary art practice in the twenty first century, as the human race is placed under the spotlight for exploitation and mismanagement of the Earth. The artworks I will discuss in detail have a strong connection to the still life genre and environmental concerns through the selection and placement of the objects, and the symbolic message they are attempting to convey.

Australian environmental history records the impact the Australian landscape has endured over two hundred and twenty years as one of imbalance.\textsuperscript{4} The landscape has been irreversibly altered, through tree clearing, and tree planting, from threatening indigenous species of plants and animals, and by introducing new unsuitable varieties that compete with the local ecology. Agriculture and farming, using unsustainable methods such as irrigation and overstocking, has stripped the topsoil causing irreparable erosion and created increasing amounts of land salinity. Water systems have been polluted by phosphorous at extreme levels, dammed for thirsty crops such as cotton and rice, and overused for irrigation in areas of low rainfall. Cities and new settlements are continuing to spread out further into the landscape than ever before, and mining has become the new means to economic sustainability.

Australian biologist and environmental scientist Tim Flannery raises concerns about the degradation of our world, particularly the amount of carbon dioxide being emitted into the earth’s atmosphere through deforestation of the world’s rainforests, and through the burning of fossil fuels.\textsuperscript{5} Rainforests are not only the greatest consumers of carbon dioxide, they are also the worlds’ largest habitats of living species with an estimated two-thirds residing in these forests. In his most recent book on the future of our planet, \textit{Here on Earth: an argument for hope} (2010), Flannery states that ‘by 2009 around half of tropical forests present in 1800 had been destroyed, and that at the current rate of destruction, by 2050 most of the remainder outside protected areas

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3} John Davis (1970s), and Mark Dion (1980s), are both recognized as forerunners in this area.
\item \textsuperscript{4} S. Dovers (Ed), \textit{Australian Environmental History: Essays and Cases}, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994.
\item \textsuperscript{5} ‘Over the past two hundred years, humans have increased the CO2 in the atmosphere by 30 per cent’. Endnote 170: Intergovernmenetal Panel on Climate Change 2007, ‘Climate Change 2007: the Physical Science Basis’, IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, cited in T. Flannery, 2010.
\end{itemize}
will be gone as well’ (Flannery, 2010, pp. 259-60). He proposes that it is possible for us to ‘restore the life-force’ or the imbalance of excess carbon, that humans continue to ignore, by replanting between eight to seventeen percent of what we have destroyed by 2050, and by using the unused carbon for improving soils for the production of food.6

Flannery’s ‘argument for hope’, is that we are an intelligent species capable of love, above all else. Through the interpretation of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, and the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’,7 we have been misguided and led to believe that we are a superior species to all other living things (though this was never Darwin’s intended meaning), and through this understanding (or misguidance) have created a society dependent on unsustainable growth. However, he believes that if we learn to love our planet (as much as we love our families and friends) then we are capable of reversing this worldwide trend of self-delusion, which will eventually lead to mass extinction. This might sound like a simplistic argument, however Flannery argues that in the past we have rectified major environmental concerns, including the banning of CFCs, and the elimination of toxic agricultural products on an international level, evidence that we are capable of addressing and resolving this problem.

As a white, fifth generation Australian of Irish and Scottish descent, living in the rural countryside of south western Victoria, I question my identity, and environmental responsibilities, on a daily basis. Surrounded by the Great Otways National Park, on 50 acres of cleared land, I am in many ways isolated, with the exception of a few cars or motor bikes which pass by occasionally, and modern technology: television, telephone, newspapers, and internet, which keep me connected to the rest of civilisation. After living in this environment for a couple of years I became interested in developing artworks related to this environment, particularly pertaining to plant and animal habitats, and the fragile ecology which surrounded me.

---

7 Coined by the philosopher and libertarian Herbert Spencer (1864) so as to apply it to his own theories, and later adopted by Darwin. (T. Flannery, p.13.)
13 September 2009

My home is a colourful oasis amongst the forest. The garden is planted out with non-indigenous flowering shrubs, trees, and ground covers, where even the native plants are introduced for their splendid foliage and array of brilliant flowers, colours, and unusual sculptured shapes … callistemon, grevilleas, correas, and banksias. The native birds have a field day sucking the nectar from red hot pokers and agapanthus, and foraging through the forget-me-nots and daffodils. A Sacred bamboo growing in the courtyard, amongst Arum lilies and covered by ornamental grapevine, is home to a protective blue Fairy wren, who spends most of his day pecking at his own reflection in the window.

Wild daffodils grow along the road verge, planted many years ago, maybe just a handful then. Today they spread almost 50 metres and there are over 500 bulbs. The old garden, where the original house burned down in the 1983 fires, is a mass of spent fruit trees which are home to wild bees during blossom season, and an enormous bright red and yellow Datura bush, which flowers most of the year, dangling almost to the ground from its heavy over-burdened branches. Foxgloves, Aeonium, and Shasta daisies abound, potentially becoming invasive weeds in the surrounding landscape.

In 2007 I began to explore the idea of using objects found in my immediate environment, so that I could incorporate them into sculptures and installation artworks as a way of locating the work, and giving the objects an identity based on place. The first of these works, which would later be adapted into *The Unswept Floor* (2007), and *Eighteen Pieces of Slate* (from the exhibition ‘Notions of Still Life and Landscape’, 2007), was a series of natural detritus and organic porcelain forms arranged on some pieces of slate found in my garden. This series, *Six Pieces of Slate*, was the catalyst for all the works that followed. [Fig.22] They allowed me to see the objects that were part of ‘my’ habitat, the plants and animals (particularly frogs and insects), which co-exist. The grey slate revealed itself as the perfect ‘plinth’ in which to stage the objects. Like pieces of blank paper, they could be easily drawn upon, and quickly erased. Photography was a natural extension of this process of recording, and allowed me to later contemplate on the computer in my study.
Feathers and other natural ephemeral objects are important in my artwork and symbolise local identity. Within my rural home I am surrounded by the never-ending flurry of birds. The delicate feather, and occasional found nest, become objects of desire, symbols of fragility and freedom, and find easy placement within my artworks. Likewise the detritus from my garden and surrounding bush are a constant source of material and inspiration – and can easily be identified as indigenous or otherwise. Through the arrangement of these found materials, juxtaposed with handmade ceramic objects, themes of land and identity, and notions of still life and the environment, form a link throughout this project.

*Honeyeaters spend hours every day during the early spring probing their long thin beaks into the flowers of the Red Hot pokers, effectively sucking out the nectar. Eastern spinebills, wattle birds, and New Holland honeyeaters cling on tightly to the thick stalk, sometimes two abreast, scouring each plant and unwittingly collecting pollen on their faces and body, transferring it to the next flower, and so on, nature’s way of pollination.*

Later in the season they will come back to feast on the agapanthus when they come into flower.

The third exhibition of my artwork in 2007, following ‘Land and Identity’ (see Chapter 3: Mimesis), was an exhibition at the RMIT University, School of Art Gallery, ‘Notions of Still Life and Landscape’. For this exhibition I invited Victoria

Howlett, a local artist and colleague at this time, who paints and works in mixed media, to exhibit alongside me. This was a good opportunity to explore concepts of installation, due to the large size of the gallery, and develop new work with some of the collected and handmade objects. Howlett exhibited paintings and objects (including found and handmade objects), which she placed in tall glass vitrines.

Three notable works I exhibited in this exhibition were *Net*, *Eighteen Pieces of Slate*, and *Still Life with Boxes*. Each of these works invited the viewer to walk around sculptural mixed media installations, and look closely at the objects without any cabinet.\(^9\) *Net* was a 20 metre length of black bird net, with over 100 pieces of porcelain detritus, hand-formed leaves and seed pods, caught in its mesh. [Fig. 23] This was suspended from the gallery roof and flowed across the floor like a waterfall and river, which could be stepped over.

![Fig.23 Sally Cleary, Net, Notions of Still Life and Landscape, 2007 RMIT School of Art Gallery](image)

*Eighteen Pieces of Slate* sits on a purpose built, long, linear, white plinth measuring 80x360x30cm. [Fig.24] Each piece of slate is unique, approximately 30x20cm, upon which sits a small composition of objects, ephemeral and handmade organic forms in porcelain, which together make up tiny imaginary fragments of landscape. These works play with concepts of the ephemeral and the immortal, and draw attention to the naturally beautiful forms in nature, and my

\(^9\) The removal of the vitrine allowed the work to sit outside the context of a museum display.
relationship with this world. As a collector of organic objects I am consciously aware of the objects I collect and preserve, and the ones I leave to decay. The detritus left behind becomes the compost and life force of the forest.

Still Life with Boxes, as the title suggests, is defined by a series of boxes, which I had collected, and subsequently used to store the various collections of detritus that I had begun to collect. [Fig. 25] The concept of this work lies in the ability of the box as a container to conceal and reveal, and to compartmentalise and organise. In many ways this work is self-referential, as the boxes are organised haphazardly on a desktop I use as a writing desk, and symbolise my obsession of randomly collecting as a way of understanding the world around me. Within the boxes are collections of seedpods, insects, feathers, and handmade porcelain organic detritus. There are also collections of human-made objects, such as clock mechanisms, and miscellaneous small objects. In the center of the desk is a box containing handmade porcelain sticks, above which hangs an antique mirror that is wrapped in white string, which connects to the desk via a bale of twine, which sits next to a small journal inscribed with the text, Remind me I am a part of nature. A large white porcelain ‘dead’ flower with a glazed pink interior sits in the foreground as a memento mori. The three drawers of the desk are partially open, and reveal the contents.
of gum nuts in the first, spilling over onto the floor, another larger variety of a native flower/seedpod in the second, and a drawer full of leaves in the third. On the bentwood chair adjacent to the desk sits a large birds nest that contains two porcelain pod forms entwined to form a ‘ying and yang’ symbol.

Fig. 25 Sally Cleary, Still Life with Boxes, 2007

This artwork is the first artwork of mine to introduce a desk, or piece of furniture. By including the furniture, I have symbolically introduced the figure, or absence of figure (the artist) that has perhaps just left the room. The objects contained on the desk introduce nature, collected from the surrounding landscape/external environment, and the boxes show an attempt at preservation and classification. The scene is one of ordered chaos. The selected objects contain a sense of poetry and symbolic emotional content – fear perhaps of the unknown, the story of a long drought and abundance of seedpods dropped by the native trees in an attempt to preserve life; security, vanity, reflection, love, loss …

In 2009 I developed another installation along a similar concept, *Still Life with Books*, whereby I collected and arranged over one hundred books from secondhand bookstores in the Otways region¹⁰ which reflected primarily subjects, particularly in Australia, and Victoria. [Fig. 26] In a similar way to the boxes, the books appeared to be haphazardly arranged on

¹⁰ Three bookstores in Lorne, and one in Birregurra – a number of the books were loaned to me.
the surface of a large desk, in this case a work desk from my studio. In the foreground of the desk sits an old magnifier, previously used for viewing postcards, and within the magnifier sit three small beetles. Alongside it are drawings of insects and books on nature, as well as an assortment of artworks which I had previously made, such as some box framed photographs, and a large desiccator with a micro-installation inside. The large filing drawer at the front of the desk is spilling over with gum nuts. This installation was exhibited in a shop window as part of the Aireys Inlet Writers Festival, and could be viewed both internally and externally.

Fig. 26.1 and 26.2  Sally Cleary, Still Life with Books, 2009

The theme of the unswept floor, and connections to traditional still life painting, tie this work together. In all these works the detritus – both found and handmade, are a constant allusion to this metaphor. The selection and placement of the objects in the installations and sculptures is controlled by the artist, but has a feeling of randomness in a similar way to the Dutch still life painters of the seventeenth century. The objects have been placed so that their audience can view them as though caught in a frozen moment in time – looking through a window, or walking into a room. The realness of the objects, juxtaposed with illusion and detail, forces the viewer to take a closer look. There is a certain tediousness to the small objects, which at the same time draws

12 Glass desiccators were once used for drying organic objects, such as fruit. Salt is placed in the bottom section of the container which absorbs moisture. I have used old glass desiccators, sourced in ‘vintage’ stores, as vitrines.
attention to the other somewhat mundane objects. These objects cannot exist as artworks without each other. The physicality of the viewer to the artwork also means that the human figure is represented in the final realisation of the work.

Australian artist John Davis (1936-99) was a pioneer of ecological installation artworks, inspired by the art installations of Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers in the early 1970s. His early installation works were outdoor site specific concepts for the Mildura Sculpture Triennial (1973), which included Unrolled (1973), a 15 metre long sheet of canvas with 49 randomly sewn pockets containing ceramic rods, and Tree Piece (1973), in which Davis wrapped sections of six tree trunks in different materials: string, calico, plastic, twigs wired together, and other materials (mainly of human-made origin). In doing so Davis reflected the political climate surrounding environmental issues at the time by drawing our attention to the unique and fragile qualities of the Australian Bush, and in the latter work the trees can clearly be seen as three-dimensional objects, not merely a banal backdrop of the Australian landscape, which could easily be overlooked. The work would later be exhibited as a series of photographs, revealing that these ephemeral, site-specific artworks could live on in a different medium. Davis represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1978.

In a retrospective exhibition of John Davis’ work titled ‘Presence’, held at the National Gallery of Victoria (2010), the breadth of and synergies between Davis’ work (1976–1999) is revealed, and the exhibition can almost be viewed as one complete installation: [Fig. 27]

In reality, I make one work over my life, so that when it’s all finished, there are a number of parts or contributions to an overall piece, each linking to another in some way. (Davis, 1989, cited in Hurlston, 2010, p. 58.)

The works (in galleries one and two) consisted of his later works (1988–1999), which emphasise his love of the Australian landscape, particularly the Hattah Lakes in north western Victoria where he spent a lot of time collecting twigs and making site-specific work from bush materials:

The dry, semi arid landscape offered a metaphor for a particular kind of beauty and presence, the sense of space and emptiness which seemed to say so much, the vastness and indestructibility which fostered the fragility and transience of plants and animals and inevitability of drought, heat, dust, rain in constant cycle. (Davis, 1989, cited in Hurlston, 2010, p.42)

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer was confronted with a vast landscape on the floor, Kōan (1999), and wall, The River (1998), of large interconnecting sculptures, made from twigs and calico strips, which appear to have been hollowed out by nature through the erosion of water and mimic tributaries of river systems. These works also seem to form some ancient calligraphic script, whose language has since been lost. The scale of the work allows the viewer to interact with the works, both physically and mentally, as we try to read and understand these monumental symbols by walking between and around them in a similar way to how one would approach an unfamiliar landscape, with awe and wonder, care and respect. There is a perceived weight to the individual pieces; however, this is an illusion, as the works are in reality lightweight. This is disguised by the scale (some individual pieces measuring three metres in length) and dark colouration of the bituminous painted surfaces. The title, Kōan, inspired by the seventeenth century Zen poet Basho, can be interpreted to mean
‘the individuality of the difference of things and the difference of the sameness of things’,14 or as David Hurlson, curator of ‘Presence’, interprets the Zen Buddhist concept of Kōan, as a ‘term that loosely identifies that which cannot be understood through rational thought but might be accessible through intuition’.15 These works embody the processes of sewing and construction with themes of connection, repetition, openness and containment, the hidden and the visible. These qualities are defined in the river, and they remind us that all things in life should be in balance, as they are presented in the installations. Given that this was Davis’ final work before he died, perhaps he had a premonition of his own transience, and this river with its hidden travelers (another term he gave to his fish sculptures), was a way of helping him pass from this life.

On the adjoining wall, stretching several metres, was an installation of Davis’ signature fish sculptures, *Nomad* (1998), made with twigs, calico, and bituminous paint. [Fig. 28] This work comprised 150 individual fish forms, each uniquely wrapped in bandage and string, resisted, incised, and painted with white and yellow markings of stripes, dots, crosses, and other distinctive patterns. The fish were set against the dark brown/black bitumen coating. The work is symbolic of Davis’s love of the river and importance of water in the Australian landscape. These fish sculptures were inspired after seeing the dried out carcasses of dead fish on the dry banks of the Hattah Lakes on one of his visits. It was this image that left a strong and resonating impression on him.

![Fig 28 John Davis, Nomad (Detail), 1998](image)

14 Ibid., Robert Lindsay, p.142.
15 Ibid., David Hurlston, p. 59.
Davis was not concerned about the ephemeral nature of his materials, as he believed that the materials and processes he used to create his installations should be honest and humble to ‘evoke associations with the natural environment of the semi-arid Australian bush. The simplicity of his materials and the apparent fragility of the works also acted as a metaphor for the delicate balance of the ecological processes and systems in his nature’. For Davis, the materials he chose came from both the landscape in which he was most inspired (the twigs, and other organic materials such as feathers and rocks), and the natural materials that he liked to work with (canvas, string, and bitumen paint), and with which he had built up a relationship over time. The materials also relate to the environment and were chosen not to mimic, but to act as metaphoric symbols for the preservation (with tar) of the fragile, ephemeral nature of things. Through this materiality he has been able to capture an underlying timelessness within the works, in essence the soul of an ancient land:

If my materials are temporal, it does not concern me. It’s what they express at the time of their existence which matters, and if the materials deteriorate over time, then that becomes part of the work: the process continues as part of the content just the same as the space works in their installation. Therefore the materials embrace time and journey through their own history. Each exhibition is an event in my history. (Davis, c.1982, cited in Hurlston, 2010, p.14.)

Titles such as Absence and Presence (1990), Fish and Pebbles: I think the earth is dying (1990), A river, a billabong, a lake and a traveler (1994), are poetic descriptions of narratives, which in turn become poetic works of art. They are, in the most literal sense, still lifes of landscape.

A contemporary of Davis, Rosalie Gascoigne (1917–99) is another Australian artist who developed work in mixed media, found object, and environmentally based installations, which represent the Australian landscape. Gascoigne felt connected to the landscape in the hills of Mt Stromlo near Canberra, where she lived in relative isolation for nearly twenty years, through her daily

16 R. Lindsay, in Hurlston, D., John Davis, Presence, National Gallery of Victoria, 2010, p.139.
walks and the objects she collected from this environment. The texture of the materials, weathered by time and nature’s elements, became representative of the land, wind, sky, and trees; the landscape viewed rapidly passing by, or gazed upon from afar. The changing of the seasons, or the passing light of the day, were part of her sense of knowing where the objects belonged together, arranged and rearranged. Inspired by the ready-mades of Duchamp, boxed collages of Joseph Cornel, and landscapes of Colin McCahon and Ken Whisson, Gascoigne, although aware of these influences and connections in her work, made original artworks which reflected her own sense of self with purity and honesty. She saw in the objects she collected the possibilities of making the countryside visible to her, bringing it inside with her:

I have a real need to express my elation at how interesting and beautiful things are and to see them arranged…I work with things I rather like and move them about until they recall the feeling of an actual moment in the landscape; then I’ve won. (Rosalie Gascoigne, cited in K. Gellatly, 2008, p.38)

The objects she collected, such as old enamel kitchenware, wooden soft drink boxes that she dismantled, pieces of old linoleum, and rusted corrugated iron, experience a rebirth in the artworks of Gascoigne. Discarded (sordid) objects (rhypography) have been given a new life as contemporary artworks (megalography). The influence of Japanese ikebana was also a major influence in her compositions, particularly the freestanding compositions which float above the floor on pieces of wood or wire, such as: Step Through (1980), floral linoleum on wood; Inland sea (1986), weathered painted corrugated iron on fencing wire [Fig.27]; and Set up (1984), enameled metal objects set up on wooden blocks on a collage of painted timber panels.

Fig. 29 Rosalie Gascoigne, Inland sea, 1986
These works in particular have a relatively minimal aesthetic, allowing the objects to speak for themselves in ‘zen-like’ balance and harmony. Gascoigne also made a large number of works using organic materials – feathers, plants and seed pods – which still survive today. These include: *Crop 2* (1982), salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*) set in chicken wire resting on corrugated iron; *Piece to walk around* (1981), a composition of gridded *Saffron Thistle* (*Carthamus lanatus*) laid out on the floor; and *Feathered fence* (1979), swan feathers braced between pieces of timber set on fencing wire.

Davis and Gascoigne both died in 1999.

I make connections with both of these artists work in *Re-collections*, (RMIT Project Space, 2011). [Fig.30] This solo exhibition was an opportunity to show what I had been making over the past two years. In fact much of this period of time had been consumed with collecting objects and arranging them on tablets approximately 20x30cm in size. These studies existed within the parameters of my studio, and were partially revealed in ‘Notions of Still Life and Landscape’ (2007), and ‘The Nature of Things’ (2009). In many ways I saw these studies as drawings, collages of assorted objects assembled quickly and intuitively from materials I had on hand.

![Fig. 30 Sally Cleary, Re-collections, RMIT Project Space, 2011](image)

The series *Nests*, which forms a central axis within the gallery, was my first realisation of scaling up the work. The wooden crates had been purchased through a local secondhand store, although they were originally sourced

---

17 In the artworks *Eighteen Pieces of Slate*, 2007; *Bonito Boxes*, 2009, and *Remember me when I am gone*, 2009.
from a ceramics factory in France. This idea resonated with me, given my background as a ceramicist. I was able to obtain eight in total. The scale transcended the work from a study into an installation. By placing the work close to the floor, it also changed the way it was viewed. The idea of *The Unswept Floor*, was immediately obvious to me in this work – the collections of studio detritus, collected over a duration of eight years, coming together in one large artwork. The title, *Nests*, refers both to a large number of birds nests, feathers, and even a dead sparrow, arranged within the collections, but also to my sense of feeling at home within this environment. Some of the objects which are included in the boxes are ceramic cups which I have collected from friends and peers, insects and reptile skins, oil cans, glass bottles and specimen dishes, a cigar box containing clock mechanisms, gold leaf paper, skulls, string, sticks and hand made porcelain forms, including sticks, seedpod and plant forms, and slip cast pods which look like large fruit-shaped eggs. The objects are placed together quickly and intuitively – as per the smaller studies. [Fig. 31]

The boxes were later photographed for documentation purposes. I had always intended to display photographs within the exhibition, and to exhibit the photos alongside the work. The intention was that viewers could recollect what they had seen – but I was concerned this might be too repetitious and obvious, and began to superimpose images of the

---

18 The crates were placed on flattened cardboard boxes (also remnants from my tile making days) approximately 30cm from the floor.
garden and landscapes over the boxes to see what would happen, and was surprised by the results. The boxes began to tell their own narratives about place. These were printed on matte and satin archival paper. [Fig 32]

Fig. 32 Sally Cleary, Blue Feather – Hattah Lakes, 2011

Other collections in the exhibition include *Arkaroola*, based on a trip I had made to the desert the previous year, and objects I had collected, placed in red sand. These were arranged in a long, open, glass faced cabinet. *Glass and Specimen Collections* and *Chair with nests*, contained specimen collections under glass objects sitting on top of the desk, including a dead parrot, animal skull, butterflies, insects, and a collection of assorted small nests in a wooden toolbox sitting on the chair. For me this was a memorial to the lives and habitats of these animals, beautiful in life and death. [Fig. 33]

Fig. 33 Sally Cleary, Glass and Specimen Collections (detail), 2011
Other Australian artists, such as Louise Weaver, Fiona Hall and Janet Laurence, have developed installation practices within their works, which become a vehicle for exploring the natural environment, ecology, and landscape. In Weaver’s ‘red’ installation *Taking a Chance on Love* (2003), the crocheted life-size animals blend into a surreal red landscape which they inhabit within the gallery space. [Fig. 34] The colour red, a signifier for both love and danger, suggests that the animals are endangered, and in this case rely on camouflage to adapt to their new environment.

![Fig. 34.1 Louise Weaver, Taking a Chance on Love, 2003](image)

This work is connected to Darwin’s theory of evolution, through a quote by Weaver who says of this work that it ‘extends many of the concepts and processes I have developed in the past – in particular, the potential for natural

19 Cicely and Colin Rigg Contemporary Design Award of $30,000 at the National Gallery of Victoria.
and human-made forms to transform and evolve in response to environmental phenomena, allowing their continued existence as hybrids’.\(^{20}\)

Australian artist Fiona Hall has been producing artworks delving into ecological themes with a socio-political message since the late 1980s, where she first explored the cross continental trade of plants in her series of erotic sardine tins, *Paradise Garden* (1989-90). Her interest in ecology grew out of her love of gardening, and researching the history of plants. With an acute social consciousness and interest in history, combined with her meticulous skills in a multitude of craft media, such gold and silver-smithing, ceramics, bead work, soap carving, sewing, and knitting, Hall has developed an œuvre which is both confronting in content and beautiful. Due to the labour intensive methods employed by Hall, which also reference women’s craft skills, we are drawn into the detail of her artwork in a similar way to the techniques employed by still life painters of the seventeenth century and even earlier, in the mosaics of ancient Greece and Rome.

Fiona Hall reflects on indigenous and non-indigenous plant forms in her artwork *Occupied Territory* (1995), made from tiny glass and metal beads: scaled up apples, peaches, pears, and acorns sit alongside the fruit of banksias, angophora, Norfolk Pine, and Sydney wattle displayed in glass vitrines, referencing colonial trade between the British and Indigenous Australians. Later on she would develop this idea further, and her relationship with Sri Lanka, another former British Colony, where she has had several residencies since 1999. Using beadwork and silver wire the larger than life size objects in *Understorey* (1999–2004), displayed in a glass vitrine, reference a museum collection: a white skull, a piece of ripe red fruit, an assortment of bones, seeds, and flowers in camouflage patterning, a pale pink brain and other indigenous plant forms replicating the fecundity of the tropical landscape. [Fig. 35] Together they form a *memento mori*, using typically iconographic *vanitas* symbols of the skull, fruit, and flowers, for an island paradise that has been ravaged by war. The title, *Understorey*, reflects the life under the canopy of the jungle, the juxtaposition of life and death, beauty and violence, loss and regeneration.

---

In another series, *Tender* (2003–05), consisting of dozens of birds nests intricately woven from shredded American one dollar bills, with the inscription ‘legal tender’ printed on the face, Hall further deals with conflict and destruction, but this time the focus is on animal habitats. [Fig. 36] Within this work lies the metaphors of home, the abandoned nest, the worthlessness of damaged currency, and playing with the homonym embodied in the word ‘tender’.

Fig. 35 Fiona Hall, Understorey (Detail), 1999-2004

Fig. 36 Fiona Hall, Tender, 2003-05
The word comes from the verb ‘to tend’ – to take care of, look after (with love and affection) – but also signifies something which is soft, not tough or hard, easily wounded or susceptible to pain. Its final meaning is to offer money as payment, or currency that cannot legally be refused in payment of a debt.\textsuperscript{21} This work, through its mixed metaphors, reflects the loss of habitat brought about by capitalism, in this case the consequences of deforestation:

These nests are homes, built with skill and care and tenderness. Once they were inhabited, now they are empty – perfect, beautiful, but forever empty...Whatever reason for their abandonment, this village of empty nests is indescribably sad. (Ewington, p. 169.)

Hall’s relationship to still life could not be more attuned to the sentiments and message of seventeenth century artists, and the culture that encouraged the genre: beware of the consequences of capitalism, for greed and vanity will destroy your soul. In Hall’s artwork, as a reflection of the modern era, our soul directly relates to nature.

Japanese-born Australian Ken Yonatani, and wife Julia, also create installation based work referencing still life and landscape. The Yonatanis represented Australia at the 2009 Venice Biennale, with a coral reef installation made from sugar titled \textit{Sweet Barrier Reef}, highlighting the damage done to coral reefs due to sugar refinery waste leaching into the ocean off the coast of North Queensland, and many other coastlines throughout the world: \textsuperscript{22}

For the artist, sugar represents human desire and consumerism. The demand for sugar-based products is wreaking havoc, obesity and environmental damage and is a direct result of the modern demand for instant gratification. (Fenner, 2007)\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
This was the third manifestation of this work, which was modified by the inclusion of colour light to simulate an underwater effect. Earlier installations were pure white, referencing the bleaching of coral reefs due to global warming. [Fig. 37]

Another work by Ken Yonatan, *Fumie-tiles* (2004),\(^\text{24}\) is an installation of 2,200 thin fragile slip cast tiles, featuring eight different endangered butterflies, laid over a gallery floor and crushed as they were walked over by the attendees of the exhibition.

31 August 2009 – Quarry Road
There is a path through the forest – once with a sign that roughly spelled ‘quarry road’. It is a rambling one-car track, now impenetrable except by the weekend biker or hiker, or in my case by me and my faithful hound, regular ramblers of the bush known as Boonah.

The track twists and turns along remnant forest. Remnant, that is, of the 1983 bush fires known as ‘Ash Wednesday’, which roared along the Boonah Road and all that surrounds, charring everything that lay before its wake. The old trees that bare the scars, and most of the survivors which are still alive, are broken like old marble statues that have survived the ravages of war and time. These trees could tell a tale or two of pioneers, clearing the hills for timber, potatoes and peas, farming cows and sheep, and of course the fires.

---

\(^{24}\) CSIRO Discovery Centre, ACT.
Blackbower (2010)\textsuperscript{25} was an installation that allowed me to physically bring the landscape into the work. The location of the work, in a stair well enclave complete with pink and green leadlight windows, provided an almost reverent place in which to execute the work. [Fig. 38] An arched niche in the wall provided a space to pay homage to a decades-old burnt tree located in the adjacent bush land next to my property in the Otways. This image of the tree was photographed and transcribed onto the wall using charcoal. Pieces of the charcoal were intentionally left at the base of the drawing, as a reminder of their origin.

![Fig. 38.1 and 38.2 Sally Cleary, Black Bower, 2010](image)

Next to the drawing, a 1.5x1.5 metre piece of sphagnum moss (collected close to the tree) was laid out on the floor. In the centre of this I created a small patch of blackened bush fire remnants and detritus I had collected from a recent forest fire site.\textsuperscript{26} Within the sphagnum moss, weeds (including blackberry) had started to sprout, and small spiders and insects coexisted. The moss was regularly watered and covered with a clear plastic drop sheet.

\textsuperscript{25} As part of a group exhibition ‘Analogy: colour, tone & tint’, curated by Dr. Irene Barberis. The exhibition space – The Drawing Room, Melbourne (sister to the Drawing Room, London) – was a makeshift and transient exhibition space, held in the stairwell of RMIT Drawing Studios, Building 4. The artworks were drawn or transcribed directly onto the walls, which would later be painted over.

\textsuperscript{26} This forest fire site was covered in Grass trees. I visited this site on numerous occasions to document the regeneration of the site. Grass trees need bush fires to regenerate and produce new seedpod heads.
at night (and on weekends) to keep it humidified. I had created a microcosm under the plastic sheet and within the city building. Upon the sphagnum moss I laid an assortment of porcelain objects alongside human-made objects collected from the site, such a soft drink can\(^\text{27}\) and a glass bottle patinated by the fire. When the exhibition finished I returned the moss to its original home. This work in many ways became the catalyst for developing the fully immersive installation works *Silent River,* (2011, RMIT Project Space – Spare Room) and *Silent Night* (2013, Craft), in which I created a floor of cracked clay, representing a dry river bed, as a symbol of water mismanagement and habitat loss. [Fig. 39]

![Fig. 39 Sally Cleary, Silent River, 2011](image)

In the first installation, white painted sticks are suspended over the floor within a blue tarpaulin, accompanied by a soundtrack of flowing water. In the second, a porcelain owl sits on a discarded chair in the middle of the dry river. This work is eerily silent, until the viewer connects with the work through headphones, where the sounds of the night can be heard. In both installations a timber boardwalk allows viewers to stand within the landscape, and become a part of the work. The longer one engages with the work, through the sound track and the stillness of the installation, the reality of loss becomes more apparent. This work is discussed in more detail in the summary of this exegesis, Chapter 5: Silent Life.

---

27 It is worth noting that the soft drink can had turned a matt gold colour, and on the underside of the can a large grasshopper or locust had left a black trace.
We round the bend, and now follow the creek, which is moving at a slow gurgling pace. The creek’s flow is seasonal, and on this spring day is happily flowing after 10mm of rain last night. It is heading off to the sea 20km from here, but will be caught by the Painkalac Dam on its way.

Blackberry tumbles along the edges – brought here by the birds after a joyous feast of berries. The first new shoots appear on its prickly, spiky limbs that reach over in our direction. There are signs of it poking its head up through the track in its conquest to cover the earth. Thoughts of poison cross my mind – I must come back with the spray pack one day soon. I will wage environmental warfare on my natural enemies, if I remember next time.

Stinging nettles line the other side, as though creating a slightly threatening path, but no harm comes to those who ‘do not touch’. The ground is covered in sphagnum moss, spongy and green, that has become a soft carpet of fecundity, rich in humus and moisture. Fresh motorbike tracks cut up the surface and carve their way through the moss and clay, I feel disgusted by this brutal intrusion into my peaceful oasis. Can't they see the beauty in this place? Apparently the mud and the noise are all they appreciate, polluting and violating this natural place of bird sounds, wind, frogs, and rain on the leaves – a forest that sleeps but never rests.

Danish artist Olafur Eliasson has developed several immersive landscapes and ecological based works of a minimal nature, including covering a whole wall with sphagnum moss, Moss Wall (1994), and creating a false sun, The Weather Project, made from hundreds of yellow light globes, for the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, ‘Unilever series’, 2003. [Fig. 40]

---

Chinese artist and activist Ai Wei Wei was also commissioned to create an installation as part of this ‘Unilever Series’, creating a landscape from millions of porcelain handcrafted sunflower seeds, spread over the Turbine Hall floor, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010: [Fig. 41]

*Sunflower Seeds* is a vast sculpture that visitors can contemplate at close range on Level 1 or look upon from the Turbine Hall bridge above. Each piece is a part of the whole, a commentary on the relationship between the individual and the masses. The work continues to pose challenging questions: What does it mean to be an individual in today’s society? Are we insignificant or powerless unless we act together? What do our increasing desires, materialism and number mean for society, the environment and the future? (Juliet Bingham, Curator, 2010.)

---

These case studies focus on artists and artworks that raise awareness about the fragility of the environment with notions about still life and the landscape. The incorporation of the still life genre in these case studies is not always obvious, or intentional; however, I have evaluated these works, and placed them within the genre, through the formation of a sub-genre, which investigates the relationships that we as human beings have developed with the natural world through the creation of objects and artworks which explore the fragile existence of life on this planet.
Indeed, as long as mimesis in art was valued, tricking the eye was one of the chief aims of still life, as it was of other types of illusionistic portrayal.

One of the key underlying themes in understanding the meaning of ‘what constitutes a still life’, is the role that ‘mimesis’ plays. The word itself, of Ancient Greek origin, means to imitate or represent nature, hence the word *mimicry*. It has been used as a device in art, including theatre, dance, music, and the visual arts, since the beginning of human culture as we understand it, and later defined by the Ancient Greeks.¹ In nature we also find mimesis in the plant and animal world, often as a means of camouflage.

In my first chapter, The Unswept Floor, I discussed the origins of still life art, which include intricate ancient Greek and Roman mosaics of coloured stone called tesserae, which formed decorative floor and wall panels called *emblema*.² The individual tesserae are very small and allow for sensitive lifelike shading (*chiaroscuro*) to build up the images presented on the picture plane, so that they give the illusion of three-dimensional objects, including the shadows they cast. These emblema, often depicting displays of food, were incorporated into the rooms of Greek and Roman villas as decorative features, and showed the extraordinary artistry of the mosaic artist-craftsperson.

The ancient Greeks were famous for their ‘art of illusion’, as described by Pliny in his *Naturalis Historia*, and his recounting of the story of Parrhasios and Zeuxis (active 440–390 BCE),³ whose rival theatre sets have been recalled countless times as an example of mimesis, to prove the point that it is possible to create an illusion from art that is so accurate in appearance, that it becomes a deception.

The still life painter of the seventeenth century was able to practice the technique of mimesis through the replication of animals and natural objects, such as the fur on a rabbit, feathers on a bird, translucency of a grape, and delicacy of a petal, to gain great admiration from other artists, and from

---

¹ In Poiesis, Aristotle describes mimesis as ‘inherent in man from his earliest days; he differs from other animals in that he is the most imitative of all creatures, and he learns his earliest lessons by imitation. Also inborn in all of us is the instinct to enjoy works of imitation.’ J-P. Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*, New York, Macmillan, 1998, p.45.
² In antiquity the word emblem was a purely technical term, designating a mosaic picture assembled in a studio and then incorporated into the decoration of a room. Elbert-Shifferer, p.15.
³ Ibid.
collectors who could appreciate this skill. These skills were also used to paint portraits and allegorical paintings, but it was the mimesis of nature and other objects, such as glass and tableware, that artists found the most challenging and rewarding. In a letter to one of his admirers and collectors, Caravaggio wrote, ‘it is just as difficult to produce a good flower painting as a figural work’. (Elbert-Shifferer, p. 83).

In theatre, the term mimesis is used to describe expression through dance and performance, and in music the representation of life through sound. In the twenty first century, we take mimesis for granted through the means of technology. We can capture images through photography, movement through video, and sound with recording devices, with the click of a button. For example, sound artists use sampling, the copying of sounds and other recordings, to build their own original sound art works.

Curator Margit Rowell (Objects of Desire: the Modern Still Life, MOMA, New York, 1997) discusses the idea of still life as ‘the metamorphosis from a reality to a fiction’ (p.74). Mimesis, or representation, is the catalyst for creating these fictions. However, the placement of the objects creates the structure of the narrative, drawing attention to the various objects through a system of predetermined ‘staging’. ‘Thus the objects of a still life, although they appear accessible, are actually inaccessible, fictional, created; ideal as opposed to real. They and their interpretation and articulation embody ideological conventions and patterns, removed from the direct experience of the real world.’ (Rowell, p.10)

This view of creating a fictitious narrative, originally conceived through the creation of Ancient Greek theatre sets, was later made fashionable by the French in the eighteenth century as trompe l’oeil wall panels. These fictions were also echoed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century ‘cabinets of

---

4 Michael Petry states: ‘The inanimate scenes of the still life, as exemplified by Jan Weenix’s Dead Hare and Dog, were considered mere technical exercises for the artist looking to practice before making works further up the hierarchy of genres.’ And that it ‘was generally believed that the more realistic the rendering, the greater the skill of the artist.’ M. Petry, *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Re-invigorate the Still Life Tradition*, London, Phaidon, 2013, p.12.
curiosity’, where eclectic objects were placed side by side, without any apparent relationship, except to create a sense of wonder for the rare, exotic, and unusual objects that exist in the natural world. Often these collections would be juxtaposed with human-made mimetic and hybrid objects, to create a tension between naturaliae and artificialiae.5

Mimesis has also played an important role in my own work. The pieces of handmade porcelain ceramic are very lifelike, both in form and scale. As discussed in Chapter 2, these forms are not cast or directly copied from life, but are individually hand-modeled and fictitious objects inspired by life. When juxtaposed in compositions of found natural detritus, the natural and artificial play against each other (as in the natural history collections described above). The white porcelain material alludes immediately to its artificiality; however, there is also a moment of confusion that occurs when looking at the porcelain. At first they can be read as mere copies. As the viewer ponders the forms further, they realise that they are not, and are perhaps non-existent plant forms. These elements then take on a slightly surreal component within the artwork – particularly the objects which are hybrids of flora and fauna. These small objects are sometimes able to animate the works, and even provide a sense of humor within the works as tiny characters at play, or rest. Their role within the artworks is not solely representational of nature. Through the process of hand making each individual object, which requires time and skill, I personally become connected to the work. At first glance, this role may seem unimportant; however, at a time when art can solely exist on found, collected, mass produced, and manufactured objects,6 the handmade objects act as a device – not dissimilar to the skill of the seventeenth century artists – to draw the viewer into the artwork. I will discuss this idea further in my case studies within this chapter.

Following ‘The Unswept Floor’7, the second exhibition of my artwork for this exegesis, ‘Land and Identity’ (Stephen McLaughlan Gallery, 2007), focused

6 The manufactured object in this case applies to objects made by sophisticated technology, such as CAD.
7 See Project details, Chapter 1: The Unswept Floor.
on a series of table sculptures exploring landscape, and the objects found within it. [Fig. 42] These artworks were comprised of small objects, organic and handmade detritus, resting on a larger sculptural form representing the landscape. Some of these larger forms were made from ceramics, as in the case of Escarpment, Dry Dam, and White Landscape. Other works were assembled on found objects such as a piece of timber, a large piece of wood fungus, and a piece of burnt polystyrene, found on the beach at Arakoon in northern NSW. I was interested in developing a narrative about the objects I had found and mimicked by building miniature environments, which could be read as a collective whole within the gallery space – covering the table, bench, and window sills with miniature landscapes. As still life sculptures, the landscape is suggestive of a small stage, and the objects of performers. It is also important to note that the title of the exhibition, 'Land and Identity', encourages the viewer to consider their own identity and relationship to the environment.

4 January 2010
Walking through the forest yesterday, we came across a new track. It felt like a premonition in a way, a moment in time that determined that I look up the slope, as though for the first time, and see a group of tall tree ferns. We had had a big storm the day before, so the forest still smelt fresh, and rich with earthy smells of humus and dampness from the torrential rain. Everything looked bright and green and brown. So when

---

8 It was later revealed that the polystyrene encased an ant’s nest.
I looked up, I felt an overwhelming urge to explore and stand under the ferns which reached at least three meters high, and that was when we discovered the track.

Standing several metres above the quarry road, it was strange how different everything looked. The new path was not very obvious, but soon was apparent by the flatness and the way it cut through the terrain. Looking down now toward the tree ferns, the light was filtered through the fronds and branches of the forest, and I could see clearly every tree, fern, and shrub, every texture – thin and thick – of grasses, bark, and foliage. The Prickly Moses has little red berries sitting amongst its needles, a bit of colour piercing the monochromatic landscape. Grasses have wrapped themselves around fallen tree branches, and look like large nests for native animals, that might need to hide or shelter on the forest floor.

This track would once have been another road leading up to the quarry. It would also have been used for clearing trees, and even now the landscape is fairly sparse, and easy to walk through. There are several enormous tree trunks, including a tree that appears to be a burnt out skeleton, with only a shell for its base. It reaches higher than any tree around it with a full canopy of leaves – a conundrum of life in the forest – the one that survived Ash Wednesday and beyond.

It is through the reinvigoration of traditional crafts such as crocheting (Louise Weaver), wood carving (Ricky Swallow), ceramics (Julie Batholomew), bead, metal work and other media (Fiona Hall), that Australian artists have brought a new dimension to the realm of mimesis, and interpretation of the still life genre in the twenty first century.

Through the examination of these artists’ works, I will draw parallels to the earlier examples of artistry and the seventeenth century still life paintings, where the intricate nature and precision of the skills these artists employ draw us into the subject matter through the detail and craftsmanship of their work. As I noted in Chapter 1, The Unswept Floor, the flowers depicted in floral still life paintings were often not in season at the same time, which meant that the artist was unable to paint these objects directly from life. When we examine these still lifes in particular, we realise they have been ‘over-painted’,
that their detail is hyperreal. The texture of the petal, the veins on the leaves, the depth of luminosity, and saturation of colour are mere illusions, a device used to draw us deeper into the artwork. The artists that I will discuss in this chapter engage us with their confident use of mimesis to define their objects through the refined skills of an artist-craftsperson.

Melbourne artist Louise Weaver has been crocheting natural objects for over 17 years. Her work is rich in symbolism and feeds our imagination. The strange animals she creates and places in surreal settings are in fact often taxidermist models that have been given a second skin in which to camouflage themselves in the modern ‘unnatural’ world in which they live. The allure of her artwork is both in the use of materials, which is extremely skilled and detailed, and the ambiguity of reality the work presents. It is difficult for us to distinguish fact from fiction, for the animals (and their surroundings) are so close to nature as not to be mere copies, and in a sense form a mimicry of ourselves, dressed in our designer clothes ready for a night out on the town.

In 2000 one of Weaver’s works, Invisible Bird (1997), was to be sent to Canada as part of a travelling exhibition but would have been declined readmittance into Australia due to quarantine restrictions. Invisible Bird was a taxidermied Hoopoe bird, a migratory bird that is known for travelling extraordinary distances. Weaver found it in a secondhand shop in Australia and covered it in white, tightly crocheted thread with sequins and set it dramatically against a black backdrop. In place of Weaver’s actual Hoopoe bird, a photograph of it, Invisible Bird (2000), was sent instead. [Fig. 43]
This work is notable for its evolution from living bird, to taxidermied model, to sculpture, to C type photograph. The dramatic staging of the subject against a plain black background creates a close analogy to traditional still life paintings.

The sculptor Ricky Swallow also references seventeenth century still life. Swallow represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 2005 with a large wooden table covered with what appears to be a fresh catch of fish, in fact hand-carved from the one piece of wood. [Fig. 44] This self-reflective sculpture, *Killing Time* (2003-2004), is his largest to date and represents both his memories of growing up in a fishing family and draws deliberate parallels with the marine still life tables of the seventeenth century that depicted an overabundance of fish.⁹ A carved wooden peeled lemon situated on the edge of the table directly references traditional still lifes, which used this iconography recurrently as a symbol of good health.

![Fig 44. Ricky Swallow, Killing Time, 2003-2004](image)

The play on words ‘killing time’ also reflects the amount of time invested in hand-carving the table and its contents. ‘His attention to detail is a way of enlarging the objects in our minds … he has shaped a world of “silenced” and

---

⁹ An example of this is Abraham van Beyeren (1620-1690), *Interior with Still Life of Fish* (c.1665/66) catalogue reference no. 11, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Still Life collection.
“intensified” objects.’10 The wood somehow captures a sense of calm perhaps through the slowing down of production time, a reminder that we too must slow down.

The skull was also common in vanitas paintings as a symbol of transience and mortality, which earlier Swallow works depict in various guises. In the painting, Vanitas Still Life by Pieter Claesz (1630), an overturned wine glass, a clock, and an extinguished candle serve to reinforce the idea that death is inevitable, and questions the validity of the books (representing knowledge) on which they sit, obtainable only by the wealthy, and yet futile in the after life.11 As if to make a mockery of this reference, Swallow has created several works using skulls as metaphors for contemporary life. These include a self-portrait inside an ‘Adidas’ cap and others lying irreverently inside a beanbag, hanging from a key chain or forming the shell of an ‘Apple iMac’ computer. By using such obvious and easily recognisable iconography, Swallow alludes to contemporary culture’s total disregard for religion, life, or death. Our need for material objects, particularly in identifying with brand names, is all consuming.

Australian ceramicist Julie Bartholomew also uses mimicry to comment on contemporary social and political issues. Bartholomew has spent many years working in Jingdezhen, China, where skillful mould makers produce her works from local porcelain.12 Early works portray detailed items of fashionable clothing and accessories as body parts. [Fig. 45] They include her I am Louis Vuitton series (2006) – a Louis Vuitton handbag and pair of shoes peeled back to reveal lips, nose, ears, nipples, and feet squeezed into the handbag, and feet uncomfortably crammed into pointy shoes. Cast from actual bodies, you can see the wrinkles and imperfections on the skin that ‘counterpoint the work’s polished veneer of consumerism’. (Julie Bartholomew, 2006.13)

12 The city of Jingdezhen is renowned for its ceramic production, including mould-making, wheel forming, hand-painting, ceramic decal making, and sculpture techniques.
These objects were influenced by observing Japanese women while on a residency in Japan, where ‘she was intrigued at the way in which Western consumer values are impacting on the body imagery of Japanese women and their role in society.’\textsuperscript{14} At this time Bartholomew was interested in the role that consumer branding and fashion plays on the world at large and our individual cultures.

Today, using similar mimetic techniques, she draws attention to the environmental impact on bird and plant species due to loss of habitat in Australia. In 2010 Bartholomew produced a series of ceramic sculptures, \textit{Endangered}. Vibrant glazed endangered Australian birds, including \textit{Swift Parrot} and \textit{Rainbird}, sit on unglazed white bone-like porcelain branches inscribed with delicate faint text detailing the bird’s demise. [Fig. 46] These artworks show the contrast between life and death through their use of colour and surface treatment. The branches have been cast from real branches, the parrots hand-modeled and painted to replicate the originals. White has become the new symbol for death in these artworks.

\textit{Rarely Seen}, 2012, an installation of 120 porcelain hand-formed flowers sitting in petri dishes, continues along this theme, this time exploring Australian plants due to chemical exposure in their natural habitats. The plants sit in dark red pools of glossy glaze, once again contrasting

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
German artist Anne Wenzel (b. 1972), has developed unique installation works made from black clay and mixed media, which explore landscape and disaster. *Silent Landscape* (2006) is a still, eerie, blackened landscape, devoid of people or animals, the remnants of a forest after natural or human-made disaster. [Fig. 47] The fragments of trees and plant material sit in a pool of black water, surrounded by a backdrop of trees painted in ink. We are reminded of tsunamis, nuclear meltdowns, oil tanker disasters, and landscapes ravaged by war. This is a powerful artwork by a young artist who recognises the false sense of security our (Western) societies have cocooned us in. Even though we are bombarded with images of disasters on the news everyday, they feel removed from our own experiences of life.

---

16 Wenzel was selected, and exhibited this work, for the International Artist Award, Shepparton Art Gallery, Ceramic Art Award, 2010.
As I am an artist exploring contemporary ideas based on a traditional genre, using traditional craft skills, I find parallels in the artwork of these artists who also explore some of these overlapping concepts. The use of mimesis is clearly evident in their artwork, as is the link to the still life genre. The underlying themes that exist within these bodies of work are the reinterpretation of traditional themes by using craft based materials and skills, and the important socio-political messages that form the foundation of the artworks. Most of these artists are concerned with the fragile ecosystem in which we live – but more than this, with raising awareness of these socio-political and environmental concerns through their artwork.

Through my own artwork, I have also sought to make self-reflective works and make a personal connection to ‘objects and place’ as a way identifying who I am. By using a combination of found objects (organic and human-made) juxtaposed with handmade objects (hand-formed from porcelain), I play with concepts of reality and illusion that also connect with time and place. In the exhibition ‘Mimesis’ (Red Gallery, 2008), photography has been added to this mix of objects, to create another layer to these objects, and another dimension to the photographs themselves.
Photography is the ultimate form of mimesis. When we take a photo, we are able to capture a moment in time. This frozen moment is recorded as a ‘still’. Within the context of my own artwork and photography, these still images are mainly landscape based, and in many cases close up studies. Using a 100mm portrait lens attached to a Canon 30D digital SLR, I experimented with photographing things in nature from various distances, so that only certain parts of the image were in focus. In Garden Series #1, a collection of six timber box frames (39x33x4cm), the garden images were shot from my dining room window. [Fig. 48] These images record a complex layer of wild grasses, flowers – agapanthus, Shasta daisies, birch trees – branches, and leaves. The background, middle ground, or foreground is brought into focus through the camera lens and clicked. Overlaid are objects collected from this environment – cicada shells, grasshoppers, twigs, butterflies, etc. – and within this layering a handmade porcelain leaf, flower, or seedpod form.

On one level these photographs appear chaotic – there is nowhere to rest the eye. On another level they become quite still as the eye finds the different focal points, and rests there for a moment or two. The overlaid detritus, symbolic of the unswept floor, presents itself in a slightly sinister way. The skeleton of a snake, the skull of a bush rat, a butterfly found after death, are all brought back to life and act as vanitas. In

Fig 48. Sally Cleary, Garden Series #1 - Bush rat (detail), 2008
the countryside, death is visibly present as a reality of life. To live in this environment, one must confront this reality, and accept one’s fate alongside nature.

1 June 2013 – Winter
As I look out through the dining room window, I see the last leaves from the Wisteria flutter to the ground. All that remains now are the skeletons of the trees and gnarled branches of the vines – ornamental grape and Wisteria, wrapped tightly around the trellis of the pergola.

The silent blue days of autumnal splendour are now but a faded memory, as the mist spreads across the valley, turning the brightly coloured landscape into shades of grey. I lament the passing of time, the chill of the earth and air. The moisture that seeps into the pores of the house, and the prevailing darkness knocking earlier and earlier every afternoon. The plants and snakes have begun their hibernation. How still and silent the fecund landscape now appears. Even the birds appear quiet as they go about their daily business.

I also lament the passing of the big kangaroo that found refuge at Boonah towards the end of his life. He would stand up to greet us, proud, but damaged, and the little energy he had left was spent lying around or grazing. And then one day he was gone. We found him a few weeks later caught in a fence; it was not a peaceful ending after all.

In Garden Series #2, the camera and 100mm lens have been used from a close up vantage point to shoot nine images, which were then framed in a collection of nine timber box frames (33x33x4cm). [Fig. 49] A knot on a tree covered in a spider’s web, a dead flower on a path, an orange gum leaf resting in a purple agapanthus flower head, a tree fern tendril unfurling, a delicate nest woven with thistles, are intermittently layered with human-made objects – a shearer’s comb and burnt match, for example – juxtaposed once again with porcelain detritus. The idea for this series of works came from photographic images of fragments of the floor of the Basilica San Marco, Venice.\(^\text{18}\) The camera became a natural extension of this thematic development and train of thought –

\(^\text{18}\) Refer to Chapter 2, ‘The Unswept Floor’ and ‘Mimesis’ series.
connecting my present life to my artwork. Looking through the lens at the fleeting moment that exists within nature, I recall the detritus that exists for a short period in time, the ever changing seasonal landscape, the post-colonial garden, my connections to this place where I live.

Four larger works (80x40x5cm), *Agapanthus*, *Branch*, *Leaf* and *Nest*, reiterate these concepts. However, the large format has enlarged the objects, so that they now appear larger than life. By using a metallic printing technique, the colours have also been enhanced so that they shimmer in the light. The overlaid objects are symbolic of the ephemeral and fragile nature of our existence. As described in Chapter 1, within the photographic artwork *Agapanthus*, a bright orange gum leaf rests within the purple flower head. Below in the understory of the plant, a collection of snake like porcelain and terracotta forms, reminiscent of the agapthus tendrils, entwine as though mating. The agapanthus is considered an invasive weed in rural Victoria and thus the juxtaposition of gum leaf and ‘introduced’ species of flowering plant raises issues of identity and place.

The other three photographs are: *Branch*, in which two broken porcelain branches have been overlaid onto the image of a tree branch, and two parrot’s feathers fall in unison; *Silver Bower*, a tiny wrens nest, enlarged at least ten times its actual size, woven with scotch thistle seed, appears as a
silver bower [Fig. 50], pieces of broken porcelain lay scattered around its base alongside a small bird’s skull and skeleton; and Leaf, a pink gum leaf rests in a prickly foliage in the forest, below lies a porcelain ring (approximately 12cm in diameter) depicting a snake eating its tale, the symbol of eternity.

Contemporary photographer Marion Drew explores the Australian environment and highlights such things as the unnecessary deaths of native Australian animals that are killed on roads and by power lines. [Fig. 51] Drew depicts dead animals and birds displayed on fine china plates set in front of a landscape backdrop, making a comparison to the hunting still life paintings of the seventeenth century when animals were hunted and slaughtered for sport and presented as an elaborate feast or display for nobility. In both the works of the Dutch masters and Drew’s larger-than-life photographic prints, we are confronted by the sacrificial nature of the subject by the scale her artworks.

Drew uses her artwork to explore a broad range of contemporary issues that includes the unnecessary waste of these animals and the acknowledgement that domestic consumption of meat is taken for granted. She creates a context for her work where the subjects depicted are clearly Australian native animals, but ones which most Australians would not contemplate eating. We

---

19 ‘Display meals’, intended for the eye rather than the palate, were a part of the ceremonial aristocratic feast of the seventeenth century.
view her photographs and feel concurrently repulsed and replete with the splendor of the beautiful animals and the overwhelmingly seductive images.

![Fig. 51 Marion Drew, Marsupial with Protea, 2004](image.jpg)

The devices Drew uses – such as meticulous attention to detail, rich colour, and dramatic lighting that emphasises highlights and shadows – were also used by the traditional still life painters who ‘over-painted’ details such as ‘cocks’ feathers or the veins on leaves to draw the viewers into the work of art and hold their attention.

I have introduced this chapter within my exegesis to highlight the extraordinary craftsmanship that is often involved in producing traditional and contemporary still life artworks, be it through painting, crocheting, ceramics, photography, etc. The role that mimesis plays in a still life artwork is not always obvious, and in some cases within contemporary still life artworks, real objects are now being used to convey a similar message.

Mimesis also occurs through the ‘staging’ of the objects, and in contemporary still life (including painting), this mimesis often harks back to mimicking the style and subject matter of traditional still life painting, as in the photography of Marion Drew, and the wood carving of Ricky Swallow. The mimesis of *Wunderkammer* cabinets and natural history collections is also a
recurring theme in the reinterpretation of the contemporary still life, as found in the artworks of Fiona Hall and Mark Dion. Hall and Dion have also explored the idea of creating totally mimetic spaces, notably in Hall’s artwork *Fall Prey*, exhibited at dOCUMENTA 13, in which she created a hunter’s ‘trophy room’, and in Dion’s artwork, including *The Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and it’s Legacy*, (2005, Manchester Museum), where he created a number of fictitious museum rooms.

Installation art, due to the physical scale of the artwork and objects depicted, often has a more emotional and connective impact than real life. This again connects back to the *trompe l’oeil* theatre sets of the Ancient Greeks, and the fictive, often theatrical settings of the seventeenth century Dutch still life painters. Bryson investigates this idea in his chapter ‘Xenia’, *Looking at the Overlooked, Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, when discussing the stage set of Parrhasios and Zeusis:

The painted grapes were so successful…that the birds flew ‘up to the walls of the stage’ … Imagine the flight of the birds … the journey begins in the sky, in the natural world, and presumably the perception of the birds is intended as pre-cultural and symbolic … then the birds leave that pre-cultural zone and enter the space of the theatre. There has been a shift in the kind of space involved, a passage from a natural space outside representation to a cultural space that houses representation. Then the birds cross a further boundary and fly into the area of the stage itself: now the conditions of the real world, the world of the auditorium, are suspended, and the space of reality yields to that of fiction. (p. 30.)

Bryson is struck with the reality of this fictitious space, one that is not confined by a picture frame, but an illusory space, that once entered can easily shift the audience’s perception of what is real. ‘One is not dealing here with straight-forward imitation, in which a real object (a) is figured forth in representation (b) real grapes here, the painting there. Rather the story involves imitation to a higher power, mimesis – as it were – squared.’ (p. 31.)
In 2006 Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang\(^{20}\) was commissioned by the Deutsche Bank to develop Head On, [Fig. 52-54] an installation which features a pack of 99 wolves flying through the air only to hit a glass wall at the end of the gallery before returning to the place in which they started. \(^{21}\) Originally exhibited at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin,\(^{22}\) this artwork was inspired by Berlin's history during the Cold War. The glass pane is the same height as the Berlin wall, and represents ‘the invisible barrier that prevents access and block’s people’s paths’. (Michael Sullivan, 2013).\(^{23}\)

\*Fig. 52 Cai Guo-Qiang, Head On, 2006, Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin*

\*Fig. 53 Cai Guo-Qiang, Head On, 2013, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane*

---

\(^{20}\) Cai Guo-Qian b. 1957, China, immigrated to Japan in 1986 and moved to New York in 1995, where he now lives.

\(^{21}\) The numbers 9 and 99 are symbolic in Chinese numerology: ‘Nine represents “long-lasting” … while 99 suggests that something is not quite complete, providing a sense of insufficiency and expectation.’ Heritage exhibition room signage, 'Falling Back to Earth', Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

\(^{22}\) This work was later exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2009, and GOMA, Brisbane, ‘Falling Back to Earth’, 2013.

This life size work, of monumental proportions, is an extraordinary artwork. The wolves are so life like and individually different, that the viewer at first presumes they are taxidermy animals. It is a relief to discover that they are in fact ‘fabricated from painted sheepskins and stuffed with hay and metal wires, with plastic lending contour to their faces and marbles for eyes’. They were produced in 2006 in Quanzhou, China, Cai’s hometown, which specialises in manufacturing life-sized replicas of animals.

After viewing this exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (GOMA), in 2013, I am struck with both the scale of the work, and the reality of the objects. Upon ‘entering the stage’ I am aware that the wolves are replicated in ‘sheep’s clothing’, but the mimesis is beyond comprehension. The wolves are both menacing and beautiful at the same time, and the installation allows the audience to observe these animals at very close range and to walk around, in between, and underneath this spectacular still life. The wolves are literally frozen in time and space. As a participant in this installation, the artist’s intention is not at first obvious. The concept of hitting a glass wall (or ceiling) refers to a barrier that is usually created by an individual or society, that prevents one from ‘breaking through’. Only when the glass is broken, freedom (of speech, for example) can be achieved. On the wall signage in Head On at GOMA we read:

---

*Head On* also makes broader statements about human nature. Gaining power and momentum through unity, the pack of wolves appears heroic as it leaps toward the unknown. There is the implication that if we blindly follow ideology, or misdirect our strength toward a collective goal, there can be damaging consequences. The resilience of the wolves hints at our difficulty in learning from our mistakes. The transparent glass wall suggests that we may not even be aware that an obstacle is there, or know who put it in place, yet it remains impenetrable—invisible barriers can be, the artist says, ‘the hardest walls to destroy’.25

Following *Head On*, Cai was commissioned by GOMA to produce an equally captivating installation, *Heritage* (2013), [Fig. 55-56] as part of a major exhibition of his work, ‘Falling back to Earth’ (23 Nov 2013–1 May 2014). The title of this exhibition was inspired by fourth century poet Tao Yuanming’s poem ‘Ah, homeward bound I go!’ ‘The text captures the concept behind the exhibition, and expresses the idea of going home, returning to the harmonious relationship between man and nature, and re-embracing the tranquility in the landscape.’ (Cai Guo-Qiang, 2013)26

![Fig. 55 Cai Guo-Qiang, Heritage, 2013, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane](image)

This installation of 99 animals from around the world, including giraffes, kangaroos, zebras, tigers, antelopes, horses etc., drinking from a crystal clear blue lake, surrounded by white sand, is an extraordinary mimetic still life.

---

Again, the animal replicas are so lifelike that we cannot comprehend how they can be reproduced by artificial methods, in this case carved from polystyrene and covered in goat’s hide. The skill of these Chinese artisans should not be overlooked within the context of these exhibitions.

![Fig. 56 Cai Guo-Qiang, Heritage (Detail), 2013, GOMA](image)

This utopian environment, set in a large gallery space dedicated to this installation, allows the audience to enter this surreal landscape of animals living in harmony with each other, drinking out of the same pure pool of water. It is completely still, except for a drop of water that falls from the roof at intervals, and creates a ripple on the surface of the lake, and the interaction by the audience as they traverse the landscape in awe and wonder at this miraculous sight. The animals are reflected back in its crystal clear finish, inspired by the lakes of Morton Bay’s islands. It is a contemporary Noah’s Ark.

In the final installations of my last series of art work, *Silent River* (2011), *Silent Night* (2013), and *Silent Life* (2014), I also delve deeper into the idea of generating a totally mimetic space, that of a dying landscape. I had initially explored the idea of creating a mimetic space in *Regeneration* (2009), by creating a bedroom within the gallery space at First Site Gallery (see Chapter 4: The Nature of Things).

---

27 The work was initially inspired by an image that came to the artist after travelling to North Stradbroke Island (Minjerribah), off the coast of Brisbane, in 2011.
The fictional space, as described by Bryson, provides a stage where the objects are displayed, and into which the viewer is also allowed to enter. By overlaying these mimetic environments with a composition of recorded sounds of the environment (as in Silent River), videorecording with sound (Regeneration), and lighting design (with sound), to simulate day and night, in Silent Life (2014), I am asking my audience to question the perceived reality and intentions underpinning this mimesis.
Chapter Four

One does not merely wish to know ‘what is’; one also wishes to know how the objects are linked together lawfully. This stage of science allows one to discover the laws underlying the phenomena of nature.

Kraft Von Maltzahn, Professor Emeritus of Biology, Dalhousie University and University of King’s College, *Nature as Landscape*, 1994, p. 18.
Identifying, categorising, and defining objects and their relationship to each other is the subject of this chapter. Conversely, this chapter could also be titled the *Things of Nature*, as it examines fragments of nature that have been photographed, collected, and reproduced, to provide a new way of seeing and arranging things that are found in nature. This subject also looks at the character inherent within selected objects, which exposes them as still lifes:

A still life often does not exist until the artist decides to constitute the model…The process of selection is traditionally influenced by the role certain objects play in the context of a given society. Although the objects are relatively generic, as subjects they are not timeless; their choice is dictated by their place, be it passive or aggressive, in a historical and cultural fabric. The deliberate choice of these objects over others identifies them, in the simplest sense, as ‘objects of desire’. (Rowell, p. 9)

Within this chapter I will also explore the history of collecting and classifying objects, and their significance to traditional still life painting, twentieth century assemblage collage, and contemporary installation still life artworks. Case studies will include the artwork of Australian artists Jayne Dyer, Sue Pedley, Fiona Hall, and Ricky Swallow, and international artists Joseph Cornell, Damien Hirst, Mark Dion, and Theo Mercier.

Objects have the power to fascinate, intrigue, mystify, unsettle, seduce, induce fear, offend, desensitise, confuse, and delight. The origin of the object, and its nature – especially its materiality either as a natural, human-made or hand-made form provides the catalyst for these descriptions. As a collection, it is the relationship the objects have to one another that develops the narrative, which further compounds the emotional, or non-emotive content of the overall work.

The concept of classifying things in nature has been the subject of philosophers and naturalists throughout history. Aristotle, born in Macedonia in 384 BCE saw himself as a classifier, particularly in the area of animals. He was the first naturalist and philosopher to describe a hierarchical, evolutionary
theory, with man at the top of the tree.¹ Four hundred years later, Pliny, (23–79 CE), observed and reflected on the natural world in his epic thirty seven volume Historia naturalis revealing his obsessive interest in collecting information.

For centuries, philosophers, naturalists, ecologists, and biologists have argued about the value of things in nature relative to human existence. Before the Presocratics (585–400 BCE), there is not much archival evidence of philosophical thinking, as we understand it today. Aristotle describes them as the chief motivators in philosophy, because they asked questions and wondered about the origins of things. ‘When I wonder, I do many things’ (cited in Tombley, p. 9).

Naturalist Linnaeus (mid-eighteenth century) developed the ‘binomial nomenclature’ system of categorising plants into genus and species. Darwin (mid-nineteenth century) developed his thesis on the ‘origin of species’ by tracing the history and evolution of plants and animals. This type of scientific enquiry forms a pathway through the course of Western science and philosophy, determining a natural hierarchy of objects and things. In Linnaeus’ and Darwin’s case, this is a hierarchy of objects and things found in nature. Martin Heidegger distinguished three traditional ways of looking at things:

1. The thing is the bearer of its characteristic traits. For examples, a block of granite is extended, shapeless, rough, heavy, etc.

2. The thing is what is perceptible by means of sensations— it is nothing but the unity of the manifold of what is given in the senses.

3. The thing is shaped matter. ²

Hanneke Grootenboer discusses Heidegger’s observation of ‘things’ in The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusion in Seventeenth Century Dutch Still-Life Paintings. He writes:

In his essay ‘The thing’, he [Heidegger] delves into the notion of ‘nearness’ in his attempt to answer the question of what the nature of a thing is. ‘Near to us are what we usually call things,’ Heidegger writes. The character of a thing is what Heidegger calls the thingness of the thing, a feature that remains, even in a scrutinised observation of the thing, concealed and forgotten... We never really see a thing, Heidegger states. When we place it in front of us, either in immediate perception or as representation, we watch its (re-)presentation rather than the thing itself. Whereas Kant does not distinguish between thing and object, seeing everything that surrounds us as mere appearance, Heidegger indicates that regardless of how far away or how close the object is to us, there is something in it that cannot reach us. This is what he calls the thingness of the thing. A thing, then, is near to us. Although nearness cannot be encountered directly, we can succeed in reaching it ‘by attending to what is near.’ … It is not that the thing is present, but is presencing. Strictly speaking, the essence of the thing is not concealed and hence invisible, but rather always in the process of bringing near. The bringing near is therefore not a permanent fixed state but a continuing process.

(p. 40.)

To understand objects and the role they play in nature, or the nature of things themselves, it is important to define the key words of this chapter: nature, and things:

Nature:

1. Fundamental qualities; identity or essential character.
2. The whole system of the existence, forces, and events of all physical life that are not controlled by man.
3. Plant and animal life as distinct from man.
4. A wild primitive state untouched by man.
5. Natural unspoilt countryside.
6. Disposition or temperament.
7. Desires or instincts governing behavior. 3

Thing:

1. An object, fact, affair, circumstance, or concept considered to be a separate entity.
2. Any inanimate object.
3. An object or entity that cannot or need not be precisely named.
4. A thought or statement.

These definitions provide an insight into the multitude of definitions placed upon these two words, and the various ways these two words can be interpreted when placed together. For example, in defining nature, it can be understood to be both the inherent thingness, as Heidegger described it, and a substance or place. On the other hand, when defining a thing, it can be understood to be both definable and undefinable.

In 2009 I curated an exhibition of mixed media artworks for First Site Gallery (RMIT University Link Arts) called ‘The Nature of Things’. The primary function of this gallery is to provide an affordable gallery space for RMIT students to experiment and gain experience exhibiting their artwork. I curated this exhibition with two emerging artists, Ariela Nucci and Rachel MacBryde, whose work examined similar themes to my own – looking at objects found in nature, and using mimetic techniques to examine their subjects close up. This was also an opportunity for me to experiment with some new ideas for presenting my work, as well as mentoring these emerging artists.

Ariella Nucci was exploring feathers, through hand-forming small porcelain ‘half egg’ forms, and painting delicate feathers onto the surface. The aim of her project was to make connections between drawing and the three dimensional vessel form of ceramics. The miniature scale of her objects, was a device she used to draw viewers into the work to discover the intimate detail of her drawings. In one series, she displayed her working drawings on paper alongside these miniature forms, as though studying them within a collection.

4 Ibid.
5 This ‘experimental’ gallery space gave me an opportunity to explore new ideas (as a PhD student), and also curate an exhibition utilising the whole gallery (which comprises four exhibition spaces).
These collections were stored in a drawer covered with Perspex to allow close up examination of these studies, which also worked as vitrines. In another series the objects were lined up in a row, precariously balanced on the edge of a one meter long shelf, viewed at eye level. [Fig. 57] The viewer is very conscious of the delicate, fragile nature of the work, which could at any time roll off the shelf and break.

![Feathers by Ariela Nucci](image1.png)

**Fig. 57 Ariela Nucci, Feathers, 2009**

Rachel MacBryde was also interested in ornithology, primarily ratites, (flightless birds). A large aeroplane covered in Emu feathers and suspended in space is a focal work in this exhibition due to its large scale. On the back wall of the gallery are a series of long narrow filing drawers, which appear as though they have been pulled out of the wall. [Fig. 58] Inside they contain drawings, mirrors, aeronautical, and natural objects – a small metal aeroplane, feathers, and a carved emu egg – referring to collecting and cataloguing in a similar way to Nucci's work.

![Filing draws by Rachel MacBryde](image2.png)

**Fig. 58 Rachel MacBryde, Filing draws, 2009**
I presented three new works in this exhibition – *Bonito Boxes, Remember me when I am gone*, and *Regeneration*.

*Bonito Boxes* is a set of six black Japanese takeaway containers lined up on a purpose-made plinth measuring 80x30x20cm, which I used previously in *Eighteen Pieces of Slate* (2007). [Fig. 59] I had been using these containers to store collected objects, such as seedpods, insects, and feathers, and over time had amassed a reasonable collection. I am interested in the philosophy of regeneration not only as a natural phenomenon, but also as a means of recycling my materials and ideas. Due to the ephemeral nature of my work, and its lack of commercial value, it makes sense for me that the work I make is re-collected and contained for future artwork – either in its existing form, or in its transformation into another. Thus *Bonito Boxes*, although developed independently, closely relates to *Eighteen Pieces of Slate* in its format.

![Fig. 59 Sally Cleary, Bonito Boxes (detail), 2009](image)

The bonito boxes have small individual compartments – ideal for small objects. They also come with a clear plastic lid, which is used to protect the objects from dust. Small wooden lavender balls are inserted into the boxes to protect against mites and moths. Within my collection are dead spiders, bones, feathers, seedpods, etc., and some small handmade porcelain twigs. Interestingly, on occasion when I was minding the gallery and removed the lids for viewers to look at more closely and clearly, they found the boxes
too confronting to look at. That the boxes were originally used for takeaway food, perhaps added another layer to the work; however, my intention was merely to present the work in an organised way using the Japanese aesthetic of containment – clean and minimal. There is also an added surprise element, when the viewer encounters the contents of the containers.

*Remember Me When I Am Gone*, also made use of the plinths from *Eighteen Pieces of Slate*, and was displayed in a small side gallery with *Bonito Boxes*. [Fig. 60] These plinths were arranged in the shape of a T – which was meant to represent part of a cross, the end of a road, or an intersection. This is also symbolic of the road I live on in the Boonah hills which has a T intersection five hundred meters from my house.

![Fig. 60 Sally Cleary, Remember Me When I Am Gone, 2009](image)

This work was self-reflective and contains two nests, some porcelain pod forms nestled within the work, some bandaged porcelain branches, a large piece of bark with a branch inserted into it and a small fox skull and snake skeleton resting upon it. I wanted to remind the viewer of the different paths we take in life, and our inevitable demise.

*The bandages were dipped in porcelain slip and wrapped around tree branches before firing. The branches burn out in the firing leaving the porcelain bandages in the form of the branch.*
As an artist working with collections of objects, I explore a visual dialogue between the objects (and myself). All the objects, including myself, are related by place, and they have been chosen and selected personally by me. Occasionally they are collected for a preconceived purpose, as in the case of furniture and props that have been purchased, but in most cases the objects are stored and wait until they find a place in my artworks and installations. Putnam explains, ‘The artist’s urge to accumulate objects in the studio is part of the age-old human impulse to gather and hoard. But artistic collecting is very different from that of the hobbyist or the ‘serious’ collector and it has a distinct character which links it to the creative process’. (p.12)

As part of ‘The Nature of Things’, Regeneration was for me the most experimental and successful outcome of these three new artworks. Presented as an installation at the end of a long, narrow gallery, collected furniture – a single cast iron bed, a small writing desk, a wooden chair, a cane chair and a mirror – were displayed as though they were in a small room. [Fig. 75-77]

![Fig. 75 Sally Cleary, Regeneration, 2009](image)

On the bed lay a pyre of white painted branches. All the pieces of furniture were collected at local secondhand stores – mostly in Deans Marsh and Winchelsea (nearby towns in proximity to Boonah), with the intention of painting each piece of furniture white, so that I could project a video onto the surface. I was aware that the furniture came with an unknown history that was
connected to this area, but was surprised during the process of cleaning the furniture prior to painting, that I was so emotionally effected by the washing – as though I was cleaning a body in preparation for a funeral. By repainting the furniture, I was covering over its past and giving it a new life. I bought a video camera for the specific purpose of making a video that could be projected onto the furniture and pyre – a slow moving film shot from vantage points around my house.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 76 Sally Cleary, Regeneration (Detail 1), 2009**

For example the camera was positioned in the same place over several weeks and edited, so that it could record the sunrise or a passing rainstorm. The scene of the video opens with a shot of wind blowing through trees. The viewer can hear bird sounds and a fly buzzing past. This transitions into a bonfire being burnt, superimposed onto the trees. This slowly dissipates to the sound of rain and a view out over the ocean, where a rainstorm is slowly making its way across the horizon (in this case the wall of the gallery), and then transitions back to the wind in the trees in a 5 minute loop. The mirror, which reflects the video unexpectedly, creates its own rainbow. This work resonated with most of the viewers, who either sat in the cane chair, or on the wooden desk chair. On the desk are some twenty notes stacked on top of one another. Each note contains a word describing different feelings – softly, darkness, breathing, peaceful, stillness…throughout the duration of the installation people
The exhibition followed shortly after the Black Saturday Bushfires, and although the installation had been planned for over a year, it had a strong impact. Many viewers left the gallery crying. The Black Saturday Bushfires is the name given to the bushfires that started on the seventh of February 2009, in north-eastern Victoria, Australia. The fires claimed 173 lives and destroyed 2000 homes, leaving whole communities traumatised and devastated by the experience. The underlying message in this work is that bushfires are a natural cycle of life, and regeneration is the consequence of this cycle. The pyre of white sticks is obviously symbolic of death, and the rain of healing and recovery.

This work also extends the idea of still life, to include a moving image with sound, thus testing the boundaries of interpretation. At the heart of this work, was the intention to create a scene that connects us, the viewer, with the landscape. We are sitting beside a bed, mourning the passing of life – but not quickly. I have tried to retain the quality of stillness – the lighting and atmosphere are subdued and quiet. Time passes slowly over five minutes – it is a contemplative work – a reminder that we too are part of nature.
The objects contained within this exhibition are all connected by nature – its powerful beauty, ephemerality, fragility, and transience. Within nature, no two objects are the same – we can recognise the form, and within each object, its distinct individuality. When an object from nature is selected for a collection, this object is selected by chance – a fleeting moment when one’s eye catches a glimpse of colour, form, reflected light, or movement as a leaf flutters to the ground at a precise minute in time. An artist who collects natural objects for further investigation does so because they are drawn to the unique formations, colour, and textural qualities that exist within an organic form. Often others overlook these objects because of their ordinariness, or lack of commercial value. They are insignificant in a world where fashion and human existence thrives on the newest technology and manufactured objects.

An area of interest to many twentieth century artists, including the Dadaists and Surrealists, has been the era of collections that existed in Europe from the sixteenth to eighteenth century, when large collections of both natural and human-made objects had their own system of taxonomic classification based on personal preference and interest. These collections are generally referred to as Wunderkammer, or Cabinets of Curiosities:

The Wunderkammer was a very private and devotional place specially created with the profound belief that nature was linked with art. The collections were usually displayed in multi-compartmented cabinets and vitrines and arranged in such a way a to inspire wonder and stimulate creative thought. They included exotic natural objects that crossed the rational boundaries of animal, vegetable and mineral, such as fossils, coral formations and composite creatures, basilisks and mermen. Particularly desirable were anomalies or freaks.

---

6 ‘A Wunderkammer is a room of wondrous things both natural and artificial (i.e. human-made), a chamber of object noteworthy for their beauty, or their rarity, or their artistic or scholarly or monetary value. Europeans from various levels of society began to collect for Wunderkammers in the 16th century. They were popular throughout the 17th century, but they declined in the later 18th century, when a more systematic approach to the accumulation of natural and human-made objects developed. Wunderkammer creators can be roughly divided into two main classes: (1) the nobility, and (2) physicians, apothecaries, and professional and amateur students of natural history’. F. Fearrington, Rooms of Wonder: from Wunderkammer to museum 1589-1899, New York: Grolier Club, 2012, p. 9.

of nature and optical wonders like special mirrors and lenses capable of distorting reality. (Putman, p. 10.)

When artists present artworks that reference collections – such as Wunderkammer, natural history, and museum collections – the way that we view the objects is taken out of their natural context, usually by placing it in a container, cabinet, or vitrine in which the objects can be viewed and examined.

American artist, Joseph Cornell (1903–72), was greatly influenced by the Wunderkammer and the surrealist movement of art. As one of the leading pioneers of assemblage collage, Cornell created personal poetic narratives, using found objects of an often ephemeral nature. He frequently used glass-fronted shadow boxes for displaying these objects, which included stuffed and reproduced birds, pages from old books, cosmic maps, photographs, and a variety of trinkets and bric-a-brac that he found or sourced in ‘dime-stores’.

In one of his earliest exhibited works, Glass Bell, exhibited in Surréalisme (1932, Julien Levy Gallery New York), Cornell exhibited a mannequin’s hand holding a collage of a rose in an industrial glass dome,\(^8\) alongside the work of notable surrealist artists, including Dali, Ernst, Picasso, Man Ray, and Duchamp. This work mimicked the ‘bell’ jars of the Victorian era, which were used to display a variety of objects of desire, such as model ships, clocks, and stuffed birds. In the last decade, the bell jar has resurfaced and become a popular iconic contemporary prop for displaying objects.

A later work of Cornell’s, The Elements of Natural Philosophy, exhibited in ‘Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism’ (1936, Museum of Modern Art, New York), played with the idea of a miniature natural history museum to signify a view of the universe, by arranging and juxtaposing multiple objects and displays within a large glass vitrine. This work consisted of various collections of objects displayed together, including a set of miniature bell jars containing various found objects. Other groups included 55 alchemic bottles

---

\(^8\) Commonly referred to as bell jar, which is used for decorative display purposes.
displayed within and outside a box labeled with references to Edgar Allan Poe; rainbows; frogs; photography; shadows; the solar system; a shadow box, called Soap Bubble Set, which depicted a clay pipe holding a ball; a fluted glass containing an egg; and a doll’s head propped on top of a pedestal, set against a map of the moon. This work has multiple references to both surrealism and the still life genre, including Magritte’s work The Key of Dreams, 1930, Man Ray’s, Ce qui manque á nous tous, 1936, William Michael Harnett’s paintings, and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre’s photography. The latter two are both nineteenth century exponents of still life, exploring the significance and symbolism of everyday objects.\(^9\)

It is not surprising that this form of collecting and arranging would be the source of inspiration appropriated by artists time and time again, as a means of interpreting our existence in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Installation art has become a major vehicle of representation for these kinds of collections, to the point of mimicking or making a mockery of museums and their collections, as in the case of Andy Warhol, Marcel Brothaers, and Mark Dion, who all question the role of museums, artists and their collections in their installation art works. These modern and contemporary still lifes are widely recognised by public institutions, and were ultimately brought to the fore in 1986 by curator Adalgisa Lugi as his theme, Wunderkammer, for the XLII Venice Biennale.

The link to the Wunderkammer (in my own artwork) is not intentional, but the similarities do exist. By containing the objects within a box, vitrine, or room, and aesthetically placing them together, there is a ‘staging’ that occurs that transforms them from the accidental to the intentional. Thus the irrational becomes rational in the mind of the artist. Putnam suggests that, ‘It is this apparent lack of rational classification, with its bizarre sense of accumulation and juxtaposition, that makes the Wunderkammer concept aesthetically so appealing’. (p.8)

These works also make connections with the natural history collections of the Victorian era (1837-1901), which were a sign of prestige held by the

---

social elite across the world at this time.\(^9\) Alexander Macleay, Governor of NSW (1826-1831), had a lifelong passion for collecting insects. As a fellow of the Linnaeus Society, London, and an entomologist, by 1825 he had amassed one of the largest insect collections in the world, which he brought with him and his family to Australia in 1826.\(^1\) Members of Macleay’s family expanded this collection after his death, so that it covered most areas of natural history, and was later bequeathed to the University of Sydney.\(^2\)

In 2007, Australian artists Jayne Dyer, Sue Pedley, and Susan Andrews were invited to create art installations in Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney, the former residence of Governor Macleay and his family. Jane Dyer used the library, which originally housed four thousand books brought from Europe, along with the vast entomology collection, to create *The Library of Forgetting*. Dyer was able to borrow parts of this collection from the University of Sydney to incorporate into her installation, which included moth and butterfly specimens, taxidermied birds in glass vitrines and some of the collection boxes originally used to store the specimens. [Fig.61]

Overlaid throughout the room – on the windows, table, floor coverings, sofa, and open storage space – hundreds of black paper moths transform the rich colourful interior. Included in this installation are suspended and stacked black painted books which together reference and ‘recollect early European scientific exploration and discoveries … and the colonial library as a northern hemisphere template to interpret the New World.’\(^3\) This is a still life of epic proportions, a visual feast of history: natural objects arranged in boxes and other containers, in and on top of cupboards and furniture,

\(^9\) During the nineteenth century the growing interest in natural science led amateur scholars to develop their own collections and societies to discuss their observations and theories. The collecting and study of insects was a particularly popular ‘hobby’. Birds were also collected and displayed in glass domed containers, or vitrines. Young, D., ‘Acquiring the Friedrich Tippman Collection: Victorian Interest in Natural History’, http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/archivedexhibits/tippmann/victorian.html, (accessed 25 April 2014).


\(^2\) Ibid., Alexander’s nephew, William, inherited the collection from Macleay’s son William, when he died in 1865.

employing processes of cutting, wrapping and arranging, and above all else – transformation. The study has been brought to life, it has become a still life which transcends a painting or sculpture – we are able to observe the objects within a three dimensional space and experience a ‘real’ physical presence, albeit surreal on several levels. We know the moths are not real. But this somehow this adds to the illusion.

Dyer, who is known for her installations using books, created a barrier of books between two adjoining rooms on the first floor. ‘The Reading Room’ also contains books dating from 1835 to 2007, which spill out onto the floor through one doorway barricading the entrance. [Fig. 62]
The entrance to the adjoining room was totally impenetrable. This installation artwork, through the titles of the books exposed, reflects seven generations of social change.14

The room installations by Sue Pedley are equally captivating. [Fig 63-64]

The goose feather, horsehair and straw mattresses in three of the upstairs bedrooms are replaced by bedding made from oyster shells, beach-gathered detritus and cornhusks, offering poetic references to colonialisation, the imported class system and 19th century journeys of migration and scientific exploration. Aboriginal shell middens taken from the waterways were burnt to supply lime as mortar used in colonial buildings.15

These works provide sites of enquiry on many levels. The objects collected, handmade, and arranged by these women, have been carefully considered within the context of this house – its furniture, artifacts, objects and history. There is a richness of colour, mixed with quietude – a reverence towards the

14 Ibid., Jayne Dyer, Rooms 2 and 3, The Reading Room.
15 Ibid., Sue Pedley, Rooms 4,5 and 6, U'vla Marina.
past inhabitants of the house, and to the Indigenous owners of the land. These artists have used the whole house to create a sensory narrative about colonialism by overlaying objects that are suggestive of another era and place. Time appears to stand still as the viewer absorbs the still life collages that beg for attention through their curious juxtaposition of natural, human-made, and handmade objects.

The concepts of ‘time and space’ play additional roles within this ‘illusional stage’, and the unique setting of Elizabeth Bay House. Each room offers a glimpse into the imagination of these female artists who can draw from the ghosts of the past, but make a mark in the present, and perhaps leave a memory for the future. These are transient artworks, which leave little trace, with the exception of the photographic documentation to prove their existence.

It is also important to understand the symbolic identities that objects inherit within an art installation. The skull, for example is an obvious symbol for mortality. Black moths, in the case of Dyer’s work, are often culturally associated to death. Within her installation at Macleay House, the hundreds of large black moths (and stacks of black books) create a sense of time being erased, and within Governor Macleay’s colourful library they black out (or eat away) the spaces of colour on which they rest. Within these artworks, these symbolic indicators lead us to look for and attempt to understand the metaphors that lie within the artworks. As within seventeenth century still life paintings, the hidden symbols that lie within the artworks can only be read by those who understand (or seek to understand) them.

Feathers are symbolic of the freedom that only birds can experience, and represent one of the wonders of our world: flight. When we observe the death of a bird, we experience the loss of its innocence and fragile existence, the loss of the spirit of life and freedom. This loss can be felt immediately when entering Ricky Swallow’s exhibition ‘The Bricoleur’ (2009), held at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. [Fig. 65] A small, life size bronze sparrow lies

---

16 Elizabeth Bay House sits on the foreshore of Elizabeth Bay, once home to Indigenous Australians until 1788. The house is majestic in size, with gardens that originally spanned over 21 hectares, terraced and planted out with a mixture of native and exotic plants, before the house was built in 1834. The house has been conserved by the Historic Houses Trust, and contains the furniture and objects of this era including women’s handcraft.
dead on a plinth at the entrance to this exhibition. Titled *Flying on the Ground is Wrong* (2006), it pays homage to this small fragile form, once a living, breathing, chirping, flying life form.

Curator Alex Baker, in the opening paragraph to his essay for this exhibition, writes:

Things have lives. We are our things. We are things. In the end it is our things – our material possessions – that outlive us … Just as we are defined and represented by the things we collect over time, we are ultimately objects ourselves.  

He states that Swallow is not obsessed by death, but that his sculptures ‘commemorate a certain energy intrinsic to the object, fixing it against a perishing time’.  

The term *bricoleur* refers to a person who constructs an object or idea achieved by using whatever comes to hand, and is the premise for my own artworks. One could dispute that Swallow’s artworks are bricolage at all, as they are in fact mimetic works of art made largely from carved wood and cast bronze. Thus the title of this exhibition is confusing, as it refers to one of his artworks of the same name, exhibited in this exhibition.

---

18 Ibid., p.18.
19 Dr Janine Mileaf examines the term ‘bricolage’ in her paper on Claude Levi-Strauss, ‘The French verb ‘bricoler’ has no English equivalent, but refers to the kind of activities that are performed by a handyman. The ‘bricoleur’ performs his tasks with materials and tools that are at hand, from ‘odds and ends’. He draws from the already existent while the engineer or scientist, according to Levi-Strauss [who first drew comparisons with this term in reference to art and anthropology], seeks to exceed the boundaries imposed by society.’ J. Mileaf, ‘Janine Mileaf on Claude Levi-Strauss: the Science of concrete’, http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/mileaf.html (accessed 18 April 2014).
Rosalie Gascoigne was a sculptor who collected found objects and reassembled them to form new objects, installations, and sculptures. Her chosen objects were a mixture of natural organic materials, such as white cockatoo feathers, but more often than not they were pieces of discarded objects, such as old enamel pots, jugs, colanders, and corrugated iron. Some of her most recognisable works are made from old soft drink boxes, which have been pulled apart and reassembled, or used to make dioramas. The symbolism of these objects is suggestive of time. The aging rusted forms and corroded paint mark time and transform the patina of the object. As such we also associate these reassembled objects with transience.

Mark Dion’s interest in nature and the environment coincided with a growing interest in installation based art practice. The result was an intriguing mix of ecological and found object based collections arranged as artworks, often in the guise of ‘studies’, museum galleries, or back rooms. These collections form art inventories, which create a narrative about a particular place and identify particular objects. The objects and narratives are a response to a cultural or political system that Dion has deemed to be corrupt due to capitalistic ideals and greed. Some of these issues include plants and animals that are endangered through mismanagement of the environment, and the role governments, zoos, museums, and botanical gardens play in preserving these species. Early work of Dion’s included Extinction series: Black Rhino with Head (1989), showing the severed head of a rhino in a packing crate, alongside other crates displaying images of Africa on the sides, and destinations, such as South Korea and Japan stamped on the front. A stenciled ‘glass’ symbol for fragile, appears on the front of the case that contains the Black Rhino’s head.

Another work (made in collaboration with William Schefferine), Wheelbarrows of Progress (1990), [Fig. 66-67] depicts a procession of five wheelbarrows, each containing a double-edged environmental message, both as text printed on the sides, such as STOP CLEARCUTTING, and other environmental slogans related to deforestation and political issues related to preserving endangered species, through zoos and botanical gardens. Objects displayed inside the wheelbarrows include, at the front of the procession, a menagerie of

21 Ibid., p. 16.
stuffed toy animals, titled *Survival of the Cutest – Who Gets on the Ark?* In the rear wheelbarrow is a tropical rainforest, complete with trees, ferns, vines and soil, with the words SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE printed on the side, titled ‘Tropical Rainforest Preserves’. This work was in response to the ‘shockingly bone-headed ways of thinking which we witness around green issues. Each wheelbarrow carried a weighty folly – from the Republican dismantlement of the renewable energy program, to wildlife conservation groups pandering to the public with pandas’. Mark Dion (cited in interview with Miwon Kwon.20)

Each wheelbarrow is a still life work in itself, containing an arrangement of related objects, which underpins a symbolic message. As a complete installation, each wheelbarrow becomes a singular object. In this case the message is relatively clear, or so we think, until we read the fine print.

Within his work Dion also questions the role of museums. As an artist, he is very interested in the way artifacts are displayed, which at times he mimics as a visual tool, at the same time questioning their intentions:

There are those who see the museum as an irredeemable reservoir of class ideology – the very notion of the museum is corrupt to them. Then there are those who are critical of the museum not because they want to blow it up but because they want to make it a more interesting and effective cultural institution…I think the design of museum exhibitions is an art form in and of itself, on par with novels, paintings, sculptures and films. This doesn't mean that I don't acknowledge the ideological aspect of the museum as a site of ruling-class values pretending to be public. (Mark Dion, cited in interview with Miwon Kwon. 21)

Other methods Dion employs include setting up his collections on shelving, in cabinets, on tables, desks, and the floor. He has replicated, relocated, and transformed the natural environment into an unnatural setting which forces us to consider the meaning behind the work, and question our own morality and ethics. The inspiration tools for his installation artworks include his fascination for nature (he is a self-confessed ‘nature freak’, obsessive collector, and bird watcher), combined with an interest in Green politics (which he also puts on the table for debate), natural history museums, and cabinets of curiosities from the sixteenth century in Europe (whose categorical boundaries were yet to be defined and contained an assortment of objects which have no apparent relationship, except to the collector or curator).

English artist Damien Hirst gained notoriety for his own still life interpretations, which reference natural history collections by using shock tactics such as displaying a glass vitrine of flies and maggots feeding on a sheep’s head, *A Thousand Years* (1990). The bulk of Hirst’s artwork draws attention to the vanities and futilities of human nature using twentieth and twenty first century iconography, such as cigarette butts, diamonds, butterflies, medical supplies, skeletons, and taxidermied animals. This work often harks back to seventeenth century still life paintings and vanitas. His work is loud, sometimes beautiful, often confronting, usually excessive, pointing
the finger at blatant consumer consumption, and obsession with vanity and life. He has taken the vitrine to new limits, which include glass rooms, complete with furniture, such as *Let's eat outdoors today* (1990–91), which includes white plastic chairs, a barbecue, insect lamps, and a white plastic table laid out with food, reflecting the ‘ordinary’ side of human existence. Standing outside this vitrine, we are able to reflect on a banal aspect of this scene, as though looking into a mirror in our own backyard. Hirst’s natural history collections, which he began producing in 1991, include fish, a shark, and dismembered cows and farm animals, and are a confronting reminder of the food chain – with man at the top. [Fig. 68]

![Image deleted / copyright permission pending](image_url)

**Fig. 68 Damien Hirst, Mother and Child (Divided), 1993**

Diamond encrusted skulls are also an iconic signature for Hirst, toying with the concept of the seventeenth century *vanitas* in the twenty first century:

*For Heavens Sake* (2010), cast from a baby’s skull taken from a 19th-century pathologist’s collection, the platinum plates are set with 8,128 pavé-set diamonds: 7,105 pink and 1,023 white. The work acts as a sequel to Hirst’s first diamond skull, *For the Love of God* (2007).22

*For the Love of God*, a platinum skull set with diamonds, is one of Hirst’s most recognised works. [Fig. 69] The skull replica, cast from an original seventeenth century skull,23 includes the teeth of the original.

---


23 Ibid. The skull from which *For the Love of God* was cast, was purchased from a London taxidermist and subsequently subjected to intensive bioarchaeological analysis and radiocarbon dating. This research revealed it dated from around 1720–1810, and was likely to be that of a 35 year old man of European/Mediterranean ancestry.
Hirst combined the imagery of classic *memento mori* with inspiration drawn from Aztec skulls and the Mexican love of decoration and attitude towards death. He explains of death: ‘You don’t like it, so you disguise it or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable – to such an extent that it becomes something else’. Damien Hirst (cited in conversation with Gordon Burn).24

Fiona Hall first started to photograph objects, which parody the *Wunderkammer*, in her series *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1985), creating a ‘dialogue between abundance and control’.25 These works depict images of human organs and anatomy, juxtaposed with common household and kitchen objects (mainly used by women), tools such as screw drivers, pocket knives, saws, etc. (mainly used by men), toy soldiers and other miniature toys, gadgets, and personal items, set on a backdrop of photocopied engravings of *The Seven Deadly Sins* by Peter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525–1569). These ‘still life’ large format Polaroid photographs, which question the historical impact of the Christian church, particularly in regard to feminist attitudes towards sex and equality,26 pre-empt her later work, for which Hall is most widely recognised, where objects themselves replaced the photographs of objects, often displayed in glass cabinets. In the late 1980s the natural world, primarily in the form of plants and gardens, would combine with her object

26 Ibid.
making to become a major theme in her work, as a metaphor for ‘the Garden of Eden’, and the theme of original sin as ‘women’s quest for knowledge’.  

Later, in *Cash Crop* (1998), the vegetables and plant forms reappear, this time made in pastel tones of yellow and white soap, displayed in chronological order according to size on glass shelves with classification text, such as *Frozen Asset* – *vanilla planifolia* – *vanilla* and *Runaway Inflation* – *tulipa gesneriana* – *tulip* etc. There are eighty forms and descriptions in total, displayed as though floating in space, above sheets of foreign bank notes with white leaves delicately painted with gouache over the surface of each note. The title *Cash Crop* and the work itself refer to the trading of organic commodities between developed and developing countries.

Fiona Hall makes use of found or common consumer objects, which she re-shapes and transforms into new objects. These include aluminium soft drink cans cut up to make knitted garments (*Medicine Bundle for the Non-born Child*, 1994), plastic plumbing (*Dead in the Water*, 1999), and soap (*Cash Crop*, 1998), to name just a few. In recent works made for her installation, *Fall Prey*, dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), Hall cut up army camouflage insignia to create a host of endangered animals, and incorporated other found and discarded objects, such as soft drink cans, bottle-tops, dice, and even old cuckoo clocks,

---

27 Ibid., p. 23.
29 When viewing this artwork at the National Gallery of Victoria (International), in c.1991 (purchased in 1990), *Paradisus terrestris* was displayed linearly across the wall.
to draw attention to the inevitable demise of many of our world’s species through habitat removal.

Most of the objects she makes are meticulously crafted using techniques such as metal-smithing, beadwork, sewing, knitting, and almost any technique she turns her hand to, to create the desired effect. She is an avid gardener, and has been commissioned to make several art installations using plants, including a fern garden for the National Gallery of Australia (1996), in which giant tree ferns flank organic pathways, in the form of a stylised uterus, a large womb which one can walk into and through, and contemplate nature and life. [Fig. 71] This is a living still life, which commemorates life and death, as it is a memorial of twins, Deuchar and Tamsin Davy (aged 26), killed in a light plane crash in 1996:

Fiona Hall sees gardens as being, essentially, about the relationship between the body and the natural world, and that the use of space in the world through architecture and gardens is a history of how people relate to the world around them at the most fundamental level. (Rebecca Corbell, ‘A discussion with Fiona Hall’, artonview, summer 1997–98.30)

---

Emerging French artist Theo Mercier (b.1984) has been developing surreal sculptures and installations that reflect the hedonism of today's society. [Fig. 72-73] Mercier uses a variety of found and organic materials, which he collects, assembles, and arranges to comment on mass production and waste. There is a freshness and macabre aspect to his work that comes from the accumulation of objects, such as skeletons, lighters, souvenirs, and cheap mass produced objects, juxtaposed with organic objects such as fruit, vegetables, pot plants, and cactus, that somehow parody the lives of the masses reflected in the titles to his exhibitions, such as Le Grand MESS (2013), Yesterday never dies (2013), and titles of his work, such as, The 300 Hottest Girls in the World (Le Grand MESS), a display of 300 lighters showing women in various stages of undress.31

This work echoes the Pop artists of the 1950/60s in Europe and America, who employed images and objects that reflected on ‘mundane’ popular culture, rather than elitism, to comment on the burgeoning consumer culture of the time. However, in the case of Mercier’s current artwork there is a sense of foreboding, a sense that we have not learned any lessons from the past and continue to mass produce and live our lives in excess as though there is no tomorrow. Consequently we have created one big mess of the world.

In one of Mercier’s recent works, *je ne regrette rien* (2013–14), made in collaboration with Erwan Fichou, the pair have worked together to document buildings and particularly ruins in Italy. They created huge individual handmade banners slung across and down walls, with text that translates as ‘yesterday never dies’, ‘it was better before’, ‘flashback’, ‘ever is over’, ‘I regret nothing’, ‘no future’, ‘rest in pieces’. The resulting large format photographs (taken with film and printed on 160x200cm paper) present themselves as still lifes – they are empty, abandoned landscapes that reflect a sadness – a final *memento mori* to a world left standing without human life. [Fig 74]
I chose these artists as case studies because of the similarities (and differences) of their work, with obvious links to the still life genre. Apart from most of the work being installation based, the works are all thematically linked through their use of pre-existing objects and the concepts around collecting. In the case of Dyer, Hall, and Hirst, handmade objects, which mimic real objects, are incorporated into ‘their collections’. The historical aspects of their work connect us, the viewers, with another time and place, which forces us to ask questions about the origins of the objects and their function. The installations are presented within the context of a museum, which connects us with the age of ‘enlightenment’ or ‘pre-enlightenment’. The cabinet of curiosity, displayed as an installation, creates a bridge that makes the objects accessible to the viewer. We are invited to ‘philosophise’ about the nature of the objects and their relationship to each other through the material aspects and processes employed by artists. By creating a sense of ‘wonder’, the artist is provoking the viewer to connect with these objects in very personal way, perhaps with an element of fear, awe, repulsion, or sadness: we can be touched by the objects through their historical referencing and placement. Curator and writer James Putnam describes the motivation behind this style of work as ‘a quest to explore the rational and irrational and capricious freedom of arrangement’.  

5 March 2013 – Summer

Summer is an ambiguous title, for it is in fact the beginning of Autumn – but one could be easily deceived. The last two weeks we have experienced an extreme heat wave – ten continuous days over 30 degrees. I have never seen the farm and garden so dry. By this time of year we should be experiencing the first autumnal rains that signal the end of summer. Alas the plants are curling up their leaves and turning brown, and shedding them one by one, in an attempt to create their own mulch and retain the minute particles of water that might exist in the soil. In a last minute effort, we have watered and mulched with layers of wet newspaper and pine shavings, hoping that rain is on its way.

Our obsession with material things, the ‘need’ to collect objects, both from a scientific perspective (to learn about the nature of things, how they have evolved, and what their purpose is) and from a personal perspective (to

collect things which resonate with us, which we are drawn to, which give us status, and make our lives more comfortable), is what separates human beings from other things in nature. In the twenty first century we have become obsessed with technology – computers, mobile phones and digital cameras.\textsuperscript{33}

In 2011, I was asked to produce an artwork for a cross-cultural travelling exhibition, ‘Tooth and Nail’,\textsuperscript{34} which included Australian and Chinese artists working primarily in the medium of ceramics. For this exhibition I created a diptych comprising two 80x60x3 cm painted timber painting stretchers covered in metallic green nylon mesh. [Fig. 78-79] On the back of the stretchers are photographic collages of Australian bank notes, which have been photographed in two different arrangements, one for each stretcher. Over the bank notes small pieces of plant detritus have been subtly placed to match the colours on the notes (before photographing them), which are only noticeable by close inspection of the art works. On top of the screens, fragile pieces of white porcelain detritus have been stitched onto the face with white cotton, to form the letters X and S. The letters trace the patterning and colouring made by the bank notes.

Fig. 78 Sally Cleary, XS, 2011

\textsuperscript{33} In 1983, when I completed my undergraduate degree, personal computers, as we know them today, did not exist. During the 1990s computers became household items, and mobile phones were becoming popular devices for communication. The Internet had also begun to replace fax machines to send messages and images across the country and around the globe.

\textsuperscript{34} Curated by Stephen Gallager, Director, RMIT School of Art Gallery and Project Space.
XS is a theme I have developed over the last three years, and rendered as two variant drawings for ‘Contemporary Australian Drawing #2: Drawing as notation, text and discovery’ (London, 2012) and ‘Contemporary Australian Drawing #4: Reading the Space’ (New York, 2013). These works ‘play’ with the letters X and S, and explore my concern for our excessive need to consume and acquire material wealth, the impact this has on the environment, and our ability to connect with nature. As such, this collective work becomes a twenty first century vanitas, a reminder of our mortality and the need to live a simpler and less destructive life. The verso of the first drawing (CAD#2) contains written text that can only be seen faintly, and backwards (if at all). It reads,

‘Too much technology, too much waste, too much food, too much crime, too many people, too many vices, too much pornography, too much hatred, too much poverty, too much greed, too much money, too many wars, too much information, too many e-mails, too many clothes, too many cars, too much rubbish, too many useless things, too many plastic bags, too much pollution, too much mining, too much construction, too much electricity, too much class divide, too much corruption, too many guns, too many drugs, too much gambling, too much racism, too much commercial

---
35 University of Arts London, for the London ‘Drawing Out ‘Conference, Curated by Dr Irene Barberis, Director, ‘Metasenta’ and ‘120 Langford’ gallery, North Melbourne.
36 New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting & Sculpture, Aug 6-Sep 7, 2013, Curated by Dr Irene Barberis.
This is repeated on the second drawing (CAD#4); however, this time the written text can be read through a cut out and folding back of the letters X & S, where the text has been ‘sandwiched’ onto the back of the front image.

In the twenty first century we live in a world that over-consumes. Not dissimilar to Holland and the Netherlands at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when capital economic growth made goods previously thought of as luxury items more affordable. Today man’s quest for personal possessions has never been greater. There are more cars on the road than ever before, more buildings being built to accommodate the growing world population, including holiday resorts, banks, and administration towers (at the cost of arable farming land), more ‘cheap’ clothing and other consumer objects, due to the rise of cheap labour and manufactured goods being produced and imported from China (at the expense of polluting the natural world with plastic and other non biodegradable rubbish). We have created a world of excess, where nature, as defined previously as ‘Plant and animal life as distinct from man; A wild primitive state untouched by man; Natural unspoilt countryside’, has taken second place in the hierarchy of our world’s list of important things. As a consequence our natural world is dying, very slowly, and in some cases unnoticed. We are slowly creating a silent life.

The ‘Nature of Things’ is an exploration of materials as much as objects. While materials have a central role in art production, within the consumer culture of products and wastage, the role that artists can play in preserving the environment is also important, and should not be overlooked in the context of this chapter. Many of the materials that I use are also found mass produced objects. The human-made objects I use are often made for purposes other than making art. An example of this are the materials/objects found in my farm shed, such as the bird net (Net, 2007), rope and
tarpaulin (Silent River, 2011). All three of these objects are made from plastic/nylon, materials that humans take for granted, for strength, and waterproofing properties. I use these materials to represent the human-made footprint left on the earth. The furniture I source is recycled from ‘the past’, such as the desk, chair and bed in Regeneration (2009), along with other objects that I discover in second hand stores. They come with an unknown history, which begin to tell their own narrative through the design and patina of the objects. Through the painting of the furniture, some of the furniture’s previous identity is erased, to provide a blank canvas (as such), for the overlaying of video or to make a visual linkage with white clay.

Over the period of time I have been making mixed media and ephemeral artworks, I have also endeavored to recycle my materials and objects. This is noticeable in the exhibition ‘The Nature of Things’ 2009, where I reused the plinths (previously used in Eighteen Pieces of Slate (2007) and the collections of objects placed on the plinths, for Remember me when I am Gone (2009). In the installation Silent River (2011), I re-used the painted branches in Regeneration, along with the white desk and chair for new artworks Glass and Specimen Collections (2011) and Chair with Nests (2011). The clay slip in its unfired state is also ‘slaked down’ and recycled. While the recycling of these materials and objects are driven by a sense of personal environmental responsibility, recycling also connects with concepts of regeneration, and the potential for my artworks to be given a new life, and configured from the different components I have sourced over and over again.
Not til then, at a time when hundreds of still lifes were circulating in the Low Countries, did the jargon of the studios coin the term Still-leven, which was carried over into Germanic languages. It is a name much envied today by French writers, for, with facile romanticism, it may be interpreted in the exquisite sense of ‘silent life’, which, however, was not the original meaning.

This chapter begins with a quote by Charles Sterling, who wrote one of the first definitive texts on the origins of the still life genre for the exhibition catalogue, *La nature morte de l’antiquité à nos jours*, at the Musee de l’Orangerie, Paris in 1952. What is striking about this quote, and the context in which it was written, is that until the eighteenth century the genre of still life had yet to be defined by name, and was considered of little importance within the wider context of fine art at this time.¹

Today the term still life is used to describe a cross-section of artwork, which includes realistic and representational paintings of floral and fruit motifs, ceramic vessel arrangements, photography, sculpture, and conceptual art (including painting, mixed media sculpture, and installation art, etc.). In coming to terms with this broad definition to describe the grouping of inanimate objects, I felt that it was important to put the genre back into its historical context. Over the last ten years, there has been a resurgence in interest in the still life genre with references to the Dutch still life paintings, and in particular the vanitas. This has been notable in the number of curated exhibitions on the subject.² While producing this exegesis several new texts have been published on the subject, including Julie Berger Hochstrasser’s, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (2007), and Michael Petry’s, *Nature Morte* (2013), which examines leading contemporary artists who have sought to redefine the traditional genre of still life painting in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the introduction to his book, Petry states that ‘in the twenty-first century, artists are not making overtly political art … as they know that it is not likely to effect any real change, except possibly to their reputation and the price of their works. Politically charged work can seem anticlimactic or worse, trite now that we live in a world of twenty-four-hour news cycles forever showing the worst that humans can inflict on one another … death in the process is sensationalized and in the process made it alien.’ And that this ‘has perhaps prompted so many contemporary artists to turn to the “nature morte” and its more nuanced representation of allusions to death’ (p.18). Petry cites a number of artists who focus on the concept of

---

¹ A. Lowenthal, p. 8.
mortality ‘not morality’ and the symbol of the vanitas, including Damien Hirst and Gabriel Ozoco whom I have mentioned in this exegesis.

The French interpretation, silent life, has been adopted by a number of artists who are researching and exploring environmental concepts, such as German artist Anne Wenzel. In this all black artwork, Silent Landscape (2006), Wenzel highlights the threat of sudden, total destruction of the landscape and society. The word silent personifies the idea of a world without sound, a planet that has become lifeless. The term ‘silent’ to personify death was also made popular through Rachel Carson’s inspiring book on the need for environmental protection, Silent Spring (1962), which highlighted the detrimental effect of chemical sprays on American songbirds. The overwhelming public response to her book and support for her cause eventually led John F. Kennedy to set up an advisory committee on the use of pesticides, which in turn banned DDT. Her legacy also led to the establishment of the United States Environmental Protection Agency in 1970.

Australian ceramicist Gerry Wedd adopted the name ‘Silent Spring’ for an artwork depicting a grouping of white porcelain dead birds. He produced this work after noticing dozens of dead birds lying along the side of an agricultural strip of road in South Australia where he lives, and saw the parallels with Carson’s book.

Within my own art practice, my quest for researching the genre came initially (in 1999) from looking at the words still and life, and exploring the paradox of these two words. Later, the connection with the ancient Greek mosaic The Unswept Floor, resonated with me, and the revelation that it was considered one of the earliest examples of the still life genre became a catalyst for further research into the subject. Today the thematic development and words – still life, nature morte, and silent life – are as pertinent today as they were in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth

---

3 Refer Chapter 2: Notions of Still Life and Landscape.
6 This artwork won an acquisitive prize in the City of Hobart Art Prize, 2010.
centuries, and the timeline described by Elbert-Shifferer\(^7\) continues to evolve and transform itself through various mediums and social contexts.

I have chosen to research an area of social consciousness based on ecology for several reasons. One is from a personal perspective, from watching nature at close range, and trying to understand my relationship with the environment I live in, particularly the native bush land and rural countryside of Victoria. I discovered within this habitat a biosphere of plants and animals that co-exist, but which are dependent on human beings for their survival.

In this present time, the world is coming to terms with a planet that is slowly but surely using up the world’s mineral and fertile land resources to develop and make industrial, technological, and commercial advances. Plant and animal habitats are being destroyed for economic and political gains, and carbon emissions are increasing at an exponential rate. With the rapid heating of the planet and melting of the world’s polar ice caps, it is predicted that in just over 35 years life on earth will be on the brink of extinction.\(^8\) This is my second motivation.

The final artworks composed for this exegesis have been presented as mixed media installation still lifes. *Silent River* (2011), *Silent Night* (2013), and *Silent Life* (2014) are related artworks that explore the consequences of habitat removal due to human intervention. [Fig 80-81]

---

7 Ebert-Schifferer, 1999, p. 12. Refer chapter 1, the Unswept Floor.
8 In Tim Flannery’s introduction to ‘The Weather Makers’, Flannery surmises that we need to reduce CO2 emissions by 70 per cent by 2050 if we are to save the world from irreparable damage to the environment, resulting in the mass extinction of plants and animals. T. Flannery, *The Weather Makers*, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2003, p. 6.
Silent River explores the demise of the Murray Darling Basin and along with it, the River Red Gums, *Eucalyptus camaldelensis*, and bird populations, as a consequence of water control, salinity, and pollution. Over the past ten years there has been a frequent call from conservationists to ‘save’ the Murray Darling basin through the release of more water from its source in Queensland and further down in NSW, where the water is being diverted for irrigation. In 2010 I visited the lower Murray Darling basin near Mildura, and experienced firsthand the loss of these mighty red gum trees, which have a life span of up to 700 years. For this installation, held in the small ‘Spare Room’ gallery in Project Space, RMIT University, a blue tarpaulin containing long white painted tree branches was suspended over a river of white liquid clay (casting slip), which later cracked to form a dry riverbed. There is a small timber boardwalk at the entrance to this intimate gallery space for viewing and contemplation. A soundtrack, composed by sound artist John Nguyen,\(^9\) recalls the sound of flowing water, which runs on a loop for 20 minutes. Human-made sounds of sprinklers, cars and garbage trucks can be heard at certain intervals layered within the soundscape. The blue tarpaulin, suspended by blue and yellow nylon rope tied to the walls, appears as a canoe carrying a funeral pyre, an obvious vanitas symbol, representing the fragility of life.

---

\(^9\) At this time John Nguyen was a third year student completing a BA Fine Art at RMIT University and specialising in Sound Art. He has since graduated and is working professionally as a sound artist.
The second artwork, *Silent Night*, explores the extinction of the Barking owl, *Ninox connivens*, in the Otway Ranges of Victoria. This exhibition was held in a secluded gallery space at the rear of Craft, Victoria, (17 January–2 March 2013), in Gallery Three. The tarpaulin of branches has been replaced by a white life size porcelain Barking owl (hand modeled, moulded, and slip cast) perched on the back of a white wooden chair, sitting in the middle of white river bed which transforms from wet slip to a crazed tile like floor. The walls were painted a dark blue-grey to simulate the appearance of night, with spot-lit lighting on the owl and riverbed. A boardwalk surrounded the installation on two sides. This work was activated by a new soundscape listened to through headphones – this was a revised version of *Silent River*, with layered sounds of Barking owls calling out to each other at night, occurring at intervals over a seven minute period, and a sequence of its blood curdling screaming. Without activating the artwork, the installation is quiet and still.

The owl was originally modeled from photographs and descriptions of the Barking owl,¹⁰ and inspired by the bronze owl sculptures by Giambologna (1567) at the Bargello National Museum, Florence, which I visited in 2012. [Fig. 82]

---

¹⁰ Sourced on the internet and wildlife journals.
After discovering that the Melbourne Zoo at Healesville Sanctuary had a pair in captivity, I was later able to have a ‘live encounter’ and private viewing to photograph the female owl, Milly. The single male and female live in separate enclosures (they are not mates); however, I was also able to record sounds of the female owl twittering and the male owl barking. The owl that I modeled and cast is that of the male owl which is substantially larger than the female, and a lot more imposing in presence. The processes for making the owl were: modeling, mould making, slip casting, and firing to 1280 degrees centigrade. They were all very challenging processes, even for an experienced ceramicist as myself. Initially I made several maquettes and a small mould to explore the proportions and complexity of the seven-piece mould. [Fig. 83]

![Fig. 83 Sally Cleary, Large owl mould, 2012](image)

The size and weight of the mould meant that it would be very heavy and difficult to slip cast, so I investigated a technique of adding paper pulp to the plaster mix and created a large lightweight mould. Unfortunately the mould had a stress point which meant that nearly every bird cracked in one place, and due to the high firing was also prone to slumping. One perfect bird was all I was able to produce. I delve into the processes of this artwork in Appendix 1– Process (5.1) – Silent Night.

When I first moved to Boonah 13 years ago, the area was home to a population of the Barking owl, the *Ninox connivens* species. Several years ago I was lucky enough to see a pair while walking through the forest in the middle of the day. It is now cited on the extinction list for this region, due to
habitat removal. Elsewhere in Victoria, only an estimated 50 pairs survive.11 At the turn of the millennium, their trademark ‘barking’ and blood curdling ‘screaming woman’ calls, were frequently heard at night from my house in the Otways.

Today these sounds are non-existent. Not only has their habitat been severely reduced due to logging in the Otway forest (prior to it becoming a National Park), the prey on which they are dependent – rabbits, bush rats, and mice – have been subject to vigorous baiting, and their culling is cited as one of the major contributors to the Barking owl population decrease. Baiting of rabbits using poisonous carrots soaked in 108012 was a common means of eradicating rabbit populations until recently,13 which could also have led to other species’ demise through either eating the bait or through accumulation in the food chain. It is ironic that the owl, which is a symbol for vigilance, wisdom, keen sight, and patience has now been relegated to oblivion.

Logging and burning off in the Otway Ranges may also be a contributing factor. Since 2008 all logging in the Otways has been banned and revegetation of these areas gives us hope for the future. Unfortunately, one of the side effects of regular burning off in the National Park is the loss of dead hollow trees in which many species of birds nest and live, including parrots and owls. Another reason is the reduction in rabbit populations due to the introduction of the calicivirus (1996-98), which escaped from a testing site off the coast of South Australia in 1995. Ironically, it is possible that due to the high numbers of rabbits in the Otways prior to this period of time, the Barking owl, which is one of the larger species of owl growing up to 50cm in height, had become dependent on rabbits as a source of food.

The third exhibition in this series, Silent Life (Geelong Regional Gallery, 19 July–5 September 2014), is the most ambitious project to date, due to the

11 Statistic: Healesville Sanctuary, Victoria.
scale of the gallery and complexity of the components that make up the work. The boardwalk is 1.2 metres wide spanning the twelve-metre length of the gallery. It forms a major feature of the installation, allowing visitors to the gallery to traverse the landscape, and ‘enter the stage’ of this still life. This artwork again focuses on the demise of the Barking owl. It includes two porcelain owls that sit on fence posts next to each other in the dry riverbed.

The two owls, made from the original plaster mould, were initially rejects, as they had cracked and slumped in the firing. Within the confines on my studio, the ‘reject’ owls started to develop a surreal presence, as they multiplied and perched on bench tops and shelving. I would have been surprised if any mice would have been brave enough to venture inside. I realised after my exhibition at Craft, that these imperfect birds had a character not present within the first ‘perfect’ owl, and that by connecting two together, as though they were communing with each other, there is an added sadness to their fate.

They are surrounded by animal bones, porcelain owl shards, and black branches that cut through the white slip. Another soundscape, this time composed by myself with samplings of rural sounds (such as hay tractors during the day and frogs croaking at night) overlaid with barking owls calling out to each other, can be quietly heard in the gallery. The rural sounds of the day slowly change into the sounds of night over a five-minute period, and then return to morning sounds, such as awakening sounds of birds twittering, with a variant soundscape that includes a rainstorm. A lighting display simulates the day fading into night and back to day to complete the narrative. The object of these installations is to provide a setting that appears quite real, but is obviously artificial. We can imagine ourselves walking along the edge of the river, looking at these two owls communicating to each other, but we know that this is just an illusion. Perhaps one day we will only be able to view these species as replicas, or taxidermied museum pieces. This is the reality of extinction.

---

As early as the 1840s in Australia, the idea that climate could be effected by humanity’s interference with nature existed. As Australia radically clear-felled trees to make room for pastoral leases, there was a growing concern that deforestation would cause the dry continent to become even hotter and drier. In Tim Bonyhady’s *The Colonial Earth* (2000) there is conclusive evidence that scientists were already concerned about human impact on the environment.15

It is not surprising that a number of artists have taken up the cause to create artworks that focus on environmental issues, and highlight the devastation being caused through humanity’s inability to regulate and reduce the risks posed by scientists across the world. Governments, whether they believe in human-made climate change or not, appear to be driven by short-term economic pressures based on capital growth and a desire to encourage development and fiscal spending. In Australia, politicians have used the climate change debate to divide a country and win election points against the reduction of carbon emissions. As the developed world’s fifth highest emitter of carbon, we stand on trial for ignorance and short sightedness. Only future generations will be able to judge the outcome, and by then perhaps it will be too late to make amends.

In 2010 the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, staged a large exhibition, *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World,* which focused on contemporary artists whose work drew on environmental concepts. The artists explored a number of themes including water pollution, water shortage, mining, the changing ecosystem, recycling, and sustainability. Within the context of this exegesis, the art installations of Janet Laurence and Diego Bonetto stand out as reinterpreting the still life genre in the twenty first century.

In *Cellular Garden/Where Breathing Begins* (2005), Laurence has created a life support system for endangered plants, using living plants, medicinal tubing, glass vials, and blown glass vessels, supported on steel frames. This

15 As an example, Bonyhady sites George Perkins Marsh’s 1864 publication, *Man and Nature,* published in New York and London, ‘arguing that extensive clearing would result in a shortage of timber as well as erosion and floods and the loss of plants and animals. He feared climate change because he recognised that good tree cover conserved moisture and provided a safeguard against extreme temperatures.’ T. Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth,* Victoria, Miegunyah Press, 2000, p.165.
work alludes to ‘the lungs of the earth’, and Laurence’s love for botany and the environment. [Fig. 84] This work is intended to draw our attention to the fragility of all life, not just our own, by creating a hospital ward for plants. While the rest of the world focuses on our survival, Laurence is focused on the vulnerability of plants and animals and the need to preserve life through public awareness.

Other of Laurence’s work (not included in this exhibition) include Stilled Lives (2000), in which rows of delicate multicoloured birds, fossils, shells, and taxidermied animals were selected for display from Museum Victoria’s 16 million specimens for the opening of the Melbourne Museum; and Birdsong (2006), an assembly of poetically labeled bird skins from the Australian Museum, suspended in a circular acrylic ring, which incorporated a soundscape of birdcalls and wing flutters. [Fig. 85]

17 Exhibited at Object Gallery, Sydney, 2006.
These works pay homage to the memory of the lives of these birds, which have been ‘collected, classified, archived, arranged, ordered, labeled and relabelled, preserved, conserved, analysed, researched, valued and revalued’. These works make up just a small part of Laurence’s oeuvre, which focuses on the concept of *memento mori* and the preservation of flora and fauna species.

Italian born Bonetto’s work *5 terrariums, 5 tours and a world of Facebook friends* (2010) began with a project exploring weeds in 2002. His ‘weedy project’, explores the idea of migration between people, place, and culture through the exploration of the environment. [Fig. 86] Bonetto, who migrated to Australia in 1996, created a three-part work for this exhibition. He developed: a Facebook campaign for users to ‘befriend spontaneous flora; five terrariums containing soil samples and the weeds that spring forth from them; and five public walking tours through Sydney’s parks and gardens in search of weeds, to learn their untold stories and uses’.

The terrariums provide an interesting interface for this exhibition. Within the handcrafted wooden vitrines, reminiscent of the *Wunderkammer* and Victorian bell jars, we are able to observe the fecundity of nature – a living
breathing artwork and a post-colonial landscape growing before our eyes. Weeds are usually an invasive species of plant that threatens local species – a plant that grows where it does not belong. Bonetto argues they are ‘just a part of the wider ecosystem like any other living form’.

As post-colonial inhabitants of this country I must ask the question, are we not all weeds?

This is a question I have asked myself many times. As a rural land-holder, I am consciously aware of our post-colonial footprint on the native environment. As well as cultivated farming, introduced plants and animals have had a detrimental effect on the Australian environment, causing land erosion and loss of plant and animal habitat. To eradicate these introduced pests we have turned to chemical sprays and poisonous baits. [Fig. 87]

During the 1860s, Acclimatization Societies were set up around the world to exchange various breeds of animals from various parts of the globe. Foxes, hares and rabbits, starlings, sparrows, blackbirds, deer, trout, and skylarks were introduced to Australia for hunting purposes. The Victorian Acclimatization Society folded in 1872, after they realised the implications of their actions. Plant species, similarly, were introduced to Victoria from other parts of Australia and elsewhere in the world by a government botanist,
Ferdinand von Mueller.\textsuperscript{22} Prior to this, native animals like kangaroos were hunted for their meat and skin. Dingoes, who were their natural predators, were baited in vast quantities to the point of extinction. With the advent of farming, including the placement of dams for water, kangaroo populations flourished without dingo or Indigenous populations to control them. Native grasses had been replaced with non-indigenous pastures and introduced weeds and rabbits were left to breed with no natural predators. In less than 100 years the continent had found itself in a state of profound imbalance.\textsuperscript{23} Today we are still grappling with the consequences of our past.

This is also an area of interest to Mark Dion, whose installations sometimes reference not only the extraordinary amount of human-made materials we throw away as waste every week, which later becomes landfill, but also the American Acclimatization Society set up in 1871 which introduced European flora and fauna into the United States. Many of these introduced plants and animals are responsible for the extinction of native species, which have lost their habitat because of the aggressive nature of the introduced species:

For some time now we have known that life is based on complex webs of interrelationships. By destroying elements within those interrelationships we reduce our options for the future and threaten to disrupt the natural processes that keep the life-cycle going. Just how many pieces of the puzzle can you remove before you lose the picture. (Dion, pp. 118–119.)

These installations include \textit{Concrete Jungle – The Birds}, featuring a collection of urban waste, and a display of objects as a rubbish tip, complete with taxidermied birds (indigenous and non-indigenous) [Fig. 88]; or \textit{Concrete Jungle – The Mammals} (1992), featuring a laneway collection of rubbish with mammals including a rabbit, cat, squirrel, badger, rat, etc.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Rolls, E., 'More a new planet than a continent', in Dovers, S (ed.), \textit{Australian Environmental History}, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 29.
Today Dion continues to work on installations about ecology, and ironically has been commissioned by a number of museums to install his work, often using the museum’s collections to create his own cabinets of curiosity. The Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy (2001) now on permanent display at the Manchester Museum, is one example. Systema Metropolis (2007), Natural History Museum, London, plays on the title of Carl Linneus’ work on taxonomy, Systema Natura, and looks at how it is relevant to present day London.24

Neukom Vivarium (2006) is an installation artwork of an old Hemlock tree living on life support in a purpose built greenhouse in the Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle. [Fig. 89-90] Dion described the process thus: ‘We’re putting it in a sort of Sleeping Beauty coffin, a greenhouse we’re building around it. And we’re pumping it up with a life support system – an incredibly complex system of air, humidity, water, and soil enhancement – to keep it going’. This artwork, which explores the process of decay in nature, is also a memento mori – ‘an appreciation of decay as a process and as a tool for discourse’.25 Dion located a massive 80 foot Western Hemlock tree in part of an old growth forest outside of Seattle.

---

24 Commissioned by the Natural History Museum, London, to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the birth of Carl Linnaeus, credited as the father of taxonomy.
The tree had fallen down, but had not touched the ground, thus inhibiting its decomposition:

You should look at this and get the impression of someone in the hospital under an oxygen tent. There should be pangs of melancholy when you see this. Of course, it is in some ways a celebration, but at the same time, it’s full of mourning and melancholy. This tree is something fantastic that has been ripped out of its context. So, there is something monstrous and violent about the very nature of this work. Like, in a
natural history museum, you find this feeling of awe toward the skill of the reproduction and, at the same time, a feeling of terror at the tragedy of people killing animals and reproducing them for an urban audience. That’s very much the kind of logic that I’m playing with here.26 (Dion in interview with Art21)

When considering this last work of Dion I am reminded of the old growth forests in Australia, which have been destroyed over the past two hundred and forty years to make way for post-colonial development. In an article by journalist and ‘The Age’ newspaper Environment Editor Adam Morton, ‘Just 1% of central highlands [Victoria] old growth survives’ (The Age, 12 September, 2011, p.3), Morton highlights the sad state of one of Australia’s old growth forests on the brink of collapse:

According to research published in US journal the National Academy of Science, the old growth is nearly gone and on the verge of being unrecoverable…More than 150 years ago the central highlands [of Victoria] were dominated by forests aged 200 to 450 years, and regulated by infrequent summer wildfires that released seedlings from burnt trees to produce new stands.

The article proposes several reasons for the forest’s demise, including:

… the clear felling of the [Mountain Ash] forest for pulp and timber, and the natural cycle which has been disturbed by more frequent bushfires – there have been at least five, including Black Saturday in 2009 … A 2009 [research] paper found the central highlands’ forest was the most carbon-dense in the world … About 40 local vertebrate species rely on old-growth tree hollows for habitat.

This article is just one of many that demonstrates the impact of our changing ecology, and the impact that deforestation has on the world’s species of plants and animals.

26 Ibid.
Artists such as Mark Dion, and more recently Belgian artist Belinde de Bruyckere, draw our attention to the emotional and physical relationship we have as human beings to these ancient species. In de Bruyckere’s resounding installation *Cripplewood* (Venice Biennale, 2013) she reproduced an enormous elm tree, sawn into pieces, and covered in wax resembling muscles, tendons, and bones of the human form. [Fig. 91-92]

![Image of Cripplewood installation](image)

Fig. 91 Belinde de Bruyckere, Cripplewood (detail), 2013

De Bruyckere reflects on the life of Saint Sebastian (died c. 288 BCE), who was often shown tied to a tree and shot with arrows (his punishment for refusing to deny his Christian faith). Through the representation of Saint Sebastian transformed into a tree with hessian and canvas sacking wrapped around its severed stumps, we cannot help but find the analogy to the martyrdom with the trees of the old growth forests that have been sacrificed for their timber.

J.M. Coetzee (winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature) writes of de Bruyckere’s work, ‘her sculptures explore life and death – death in life, life in death, life before life, death before death – in the most intimate and most disturbing way. They bring illumination, but the illumination is as dark as it is profound.’

27 I viewed a variation of this artwork, and exhibition by Belinde de Bruckere, *Il me Faut Tout Oublier*, La Maison Rouge, Paris (13 February–11 May 2014).

Fiona Hall made a resounding installation artwork about extinction at dOCUMENTA 13, 2012, in the form of a hunter’s shack in the Kalsau Park, Kassel, Germany. Highlighting a number of animals on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List\(^\text{29}\) of threatened species of plants and animals, Hall’s installation displayed them as hunting trophies attached to the wall of a wooden hut, which was painted in camouflage insignia. [Fig. 93]

Stepping inside the dimly lit hut, it takes a moment to adjust to the light before the ‘trophy heads’ emerge, hanging on the four walls. [Fig. 94] This work also references the Age of Enlightenment and ‘cabinets of curiosity’, when exotic animals were hunted for their heads and displayed on the wall alongside other

collections of strange, rare, and exotic natural objects including flora and fauna. Each head is made from shredded camouflage insignia denoting the animal’s country of origin, and other human-made materials such as soft drink tins and army memorabilia, stitched together to form strange, mimetic creatures such as Kondor, which carries an IUCN threat status of critically endangered:

Comically fierce and pathetic, these ambiguous creatures, hanging by a thread are accompanied by other objects that are beautiful, strange and disturbing – subjects of both man’s admiration and his exploitation. (Eva Scharrer, dOCUMENTA 13 Catalogue, p. 260.)

As an installation artwork, Fall Prey, produced for dOCUMENTA 13, is fully immersive, and beckons the viewer to participate in the room as a spectator held in suspense with awe and fascination, as one would have once participated as a guest in a private natural history museum. As we read each label, describing its status, stating whether it is ‘threatened’, ‘critically endangered’, ‘extinct in the wild’ or ‘extinct’ according to ICUN Red List, we are torn between a feeling of sadness and wonder. This is the power of still life.

Hall uses the image of the skull over and again; this obvious vanitas symbol has become a revisited signature. Variously made from glass beads (Understorey, 1999-2004), $100 American bank notes (21st Century Man, 2011), and aluminum soft drink cans (untitled [Mother and Monster Energy

Images deleted / copyright permission pending
drinks], 2012). In some of her aluminum tin skull vanitas, such Love as Me Tender (2009–11), made from a sardine tin, miniature videos of life have been inserted. [Fig. 95] We are compelled to watch.

The inclusion of video into these otherwise still works does not detract from their ability to reach us as still life artworks. Once again the device of miniature detail, a signature of traditional still lifes, draws us into the work and holds our attention. The idea of stillness is not significant in a still life artwork. It is rather the act of creating stillness (in the form of contemplation in the viewer), of holding us in this moment and slowing down time, that is paramount to its success.

Several of the artists’ installations I have explored, such as Mark Dion and John Davis, may at first glance appear to be poles apart; however, they both share commonalities in conceptual interpretation. Both artists are preoccupied with materials that are found in their own environments, which reflect their concerns for the natural habitats of plant and animal species. Both artists question the human race’s dominance over nature. Through the placement of objects – both human-made and organic – they create new environments which have a human scale. They invite the audience to become a part of the work and to interact with it on physical and emotional levels, by questioning the meaning and relationship of the objects within the space. Politics is also a central consideration in the motivation for making – to raise awareness of the tenuous position of the environment,
created by governments attempting to control nature for the satisfaction of their constituents.

This is a world without balance, where nature has no voice. Within the context of still life art, the role of the artist is to be the voice of the voiceless through exploration of materials, objects, and the relationships that these objects form with these materials, each other, and the viewer.

In concluding this final chapter, I respond to an essay by journalist and art critic Steven Giese, ‘Throwing Whalebones to Chihuahuas’, written in October 1997 for Art Monthly Australia. In this essay he criticises Australian artists for their lack of concern over the environment, and lack of understanding for humankind’s relationship with ‘Nature’, which is, to quote Geise, ‘tragic and outrageous’. He states in this article:

> With some notable exceptions, artists still tend to assume that art and politics don’t mix and that art is still pretty much an activity pursued for its own sake. Apathy towards ecological issues has been much easier than having to take up a position of responsibility. (p. 4.)

This criticism, in response to ‘Australian Perspecta 1997: between art and nature’ at the Art Gallery of NSW, made me realise that in the second decade of the twenty first century there is still only a relatively small proportion of Australian and international artists and galleries taking up political challenges that concern environmental issues, such as (to quote Geise) ‘the extinction of species; human overpopulation; deforestation; collapse of fish stocks; the decline of rivers, oceans and soil; greenhouse gas emissions; feral animals, these just for starters’ (p. 4). It was a relief to see the exhibition ‘In the Balance: Art for a Changing World’, as I share Geise’s concerns for the environment, and the important role that artists can play in the public domain for adding another voice to public debate and awareness through art. I also acknowledge the efforts being made by RMIT University to establish a

research network that focuses on human and non-human ecological issues, despite criticism from our current government that public funding (such as Australian Research Council grants) should be withdrawn from projects that address climate change.\textsuperscript{31}

This exegesis has focused on the still life genre, and artists who primarily use mixed media and installation based works to explore our relationship with nature. I posed the question: What is the nature of still life in the twenty first century? I have examined how contemporary artists, including myself, who have sought to re-explore and redeem aspects of traditional western still life art, and re-interpret this theme to comment on current socio-political aspects of contemporary society, including ecological issues.\textsuperscript{32}

My project commenced with the image of a tree as a symbol of hope for the future, and ends with the silencing of life. Through the artworks I have produced over a seven-year period, I have examined a unique microcosm and habitat that I was able to become a part of and connect with on a personal level. The artwork I consequently produced and publicly exhibited is a celebration and commiseration of this experience. The realisation that this habitat is extremely fragile, and can be altered by the use of chemical sprays, poisons, introduced species of plants and animals, and even the burning of forests for the preservation of human life, is of great concern to me.

Through the observation of the environment around me, and the investigation of mixed media artworks, I have connected with the still life genre of art, initially through an ancient \textit{trompe l’oeil} mosaic that represented the detritus left on the \textit{triclinium} (dining room floor) after an elaborate feast. My initial artwork for this PhD was a humble and intimate response to, and representation of this mosaic, \textit{The Unswept Floor}, and the catalyst for producing all the works that followed. This artwork led to compulsive collecting of forest

\textsuperscript{31} AEGIS (Arts, Ecology, Globalization & the Interpretation of Science) is a Research Group and Network, set up by the School of Art at RMIT University, to create national and global links with artists and art historians who make, curate, and write about art. AEGIS focuses on innovative projects that prioritise the role of art in interpretations of natural history, science, and technology.

\textsuperscript{32} This is a summarized version of the original research questions which appear in the Introduction.
and garden detritus, which I preserved and categorized, and developed into three-dimensional collages, in order to connect with a natural environment, and to develop the relationship between the found objects. As an artist working in a rural environment, I also wanted to interact with this rich tableau of forms, colours and textures, so that I could connect with nature, and this ‘way’ of working and making, allowed me unconditional freedom to explore ideas. Later I identified with *Wunderkammer*, and the taxonomy of classifying and organising / arranging objects within a composition. I tried to avoid using a vitrine, and was also consciously aware that other artists were also exploring the still life genre, and adopting reference ‘props’, such as the ‘bell jar’, (made famous by Joseph Cornell), and the vanitas symbol of the skull. Concurrently there was a growing trend in Australian ceramics to develop still life arrangements of porcelain vessels (made popular by Gwyn Hannsen Pigott in the 1990s) that were originally based on the paintings of Georgio Morandi. As a sculptor, who primarily worked in ceramics (until this time), I did not want my artworks to be categorized as ‘ceramic still lifes’, but instead to broaden the field of ceramics in Australia, to include installation, mixed media and time-based artworks.

Prior to producing this body of new work, I had focused on making artworks derived from industrial landscapes and architectural environs, completing my MA (Fine Art) in 1995 on these themes. After buying a rural property in 1999 I had several years of uncertainty about the direction my artwork would take. Living in a remote pocket of south western Victoria was not conducive to continuing this former body of work, and the decision to move into a field of art research that involved making organic sculpture and artworks about the environment was not an easy transition, in fact it took several years for my artwork to establish a new identity.

As an artist with over twenty years of experience, I have always avoided trends in art practice, and it was purely by chance that I discovered the trend of contemporary still life growing around me. By this stage I had already defined the parameters for my PhD, which was to explore artworks that used nontraditional materials and techniques, as opposed to painting, and focused on traditional craft based materials and skills. I had also proposed that
my artwork and research would focus on ecology, including human ecology, and humanity’s relationship with the environment. The research component of this PhD helped me to make connections and associations with other artists that I have viewed in exhibitions, read and written about. Fictional and nonfictional accounts of people living in rural areas of Australia, and the descriptions of the landscape and their emotional response to place, also helped to keep my work fresh, and incorporate the idea of part-fictional narratives into the artworks, as opposed to purely self referential ones.

I have recorded the process of developing the artworks for this exegesis in several diary entries in a final chapter on process, and have described the process of development as ‘organic’ in my introduction, (as opposed to producing organic artworks). That the artworks are also now organic in nature, is complimentary to my practice. I have also expanded the interpretation of the still life genre, to include artworks which stretch the boundaries of contemporary interpretation, including time-based media, such as video, sound and the purposeful action of clay drying: Regeneration, Silent River, Silent Night and Silent Life.

The methodology for presenting my outcomes, for the purposes of this PhD is sequentially presented as exhibitions and chapters. It becomes apparent when reading these works in a sequence, that the works gradually become more confident, bolder, experimental, and eventually installation based. Through the process of analytical research, and making ceramic objects, and ‘playing’ with compositions, the concept of the ‘unswept floor’ became a catalyst for expanding this theme to encompass the forest floor and Australian landscape, and allowed my audiences to enter the artworks, and in some cases interact with them (Regeneration, 2009, refer chapter four).

Through the methodology of theoretical research, reading and analyzing authoritative texts on the still life genre, I also became aware of its vast history, and its evolution from humble origins (ancient Greece, 3rd century BCE) to elaborate ‘high brow’ painting (17th century), to political commentary
about consumerism (1950/60s), to contemporary *memento mori*. With the gradual awareness and knowledge that this genre, was ‘indefinable’, or not easily defined, presented me with liberties to experiment and question whether an artwork could be categorized as a still life, and what the parameters were.

Each exhibition I accomplished was liberating. The works I produced and exhibited were in many ways dictated by the space in which they were (intended to be) exhibited. For example in the initial two exhibitions: *The Unswept Floor* (e.g.etal, 2007) and *Land and Identity* (Stephan McLaughlan Gallery, 2007), the exhibition spaces were very small, and the works produced echoed the space. The third exhibition, *Notions of Still Life and Landscape* (School of Art Gallery, RMIT University, 2007), was a much larger gallery, and allowed me to think about how I could enlarge my artworks and make them more installation based. This had always been my intention, but having the gallery space to present artworks of this kind – non-commercial experimental artworks, was not an easily accessible option.33

The exhibitions that were held in commercial galleries, *The Unswept Floor* (e.g.etal), *Mimesis* (Red Gallery), and *Land and Identity* (Stephen Mclaughlan), were developed for a commercial audience, and were constrained by this intention – to sit on a plinth / table, or hang on the wall of a house. With the opportunities presented by The School of Art Gallery; First Site; Project Space; Spare Room; Craft; and Geelong Gallery, the gallery spaces allowed me the freedom to explore immersive installation concepts, and delve deeper into creating ‘meaningful’ places of contemplation.

Over the years of residing in Boonah, I have taken a pro-active stance in eradicating introduced weeds, and protecting the natural environment. The gardens are still predominantly non-indigenous, however through conscientious maintenance it is possible to control the invasive species, and attract birds and bees to the area through colourful ‘enticing’ plants. I have also become aware of habitat loss, and feral animals that threaten indigenous

33 I am fortunate that RMIT University, School of Art Galleries, and RMIT University, Link Arts, assisted me in the outcomes of five exhibitions: ‘Notions of Still Life and Landscape’ (School of Art Gallery); ‘The Nature of Things’ (First Site); ‘Re-Collections’ (Project Space), and ‘Silent River’ (Spare Room).
fauna. I am reminded of the Tasmanian Tiger, hunted to extinction, and the desperate search to find one living animal, and decided to make a commentary on local species which do not get as much attention, that do still exist in some parts of Victoria, but are declining in other regions.

The creation of the installations for the artworks, *Silent River*, *Silent Night* and *Silent Life*, were transformative for me in both concept and process, involving a lot of planning, and in some instances, hundred’s of litres of liquid clay ‘slip’, as well as lighting and sound design. The floor – once again evoking the unswept floor, starts off as a liquid, sets, and slowly dries over a number of days. This transition is very slow, and becomes a time-based piece through this drying process. The drying and cracking of the slip floor, is evocative of a landscape subject to drought, and the interplay of white objects (painted sticks – *Silent River*, and porcelain owls–*Silent Night / Silent Life*), positioned above the white river of slip, adds another depth to the narrative of the dying landscape.

Lighting plays an essential role in controlling the pace and ‘stillness’ of these last three works, it is also a representation of night (moon light), or day. The plan for *Silent Life* was to take this concept one step further by synchronizing the lighting to the accompanying soundscape, so that night slowly fades into day and back to night again.34 The lighting design in this case produces another mimesis, and with this mimesis the device to hold the audience in the installation – to spend time in the space, and further contemplate the meaning behind the artwork.

Sound is used as a trigger for connecting us to the landscape, and reminding the audience that once the sound of nature is gone, we are left with silence. In the installation *Silent Night*, the sound was removed from the external ambience of the work, so that it could only be listened to through headphones. This separated the audience into two groups, the ones who listened, and the ones that did not. The ones that listened spent an immersive time, sitting in the installation / landscape (on a bench within the gallery space), watching the moon lit owl sitting in the dry riverbed. The sounds they listened

34 At the time of writing this exegesis, *Silent Life* was still in its planning stages, and the outcomes unknown.
to comprised of field recordings, overlaid on a digital soundtrack composed and produced by sound artist, John Nuguyn, under my direction. The ones who did not engage with the headphones, either dismissed the work after a minute, or stayed to consider the artwork for its stillness, quietness, and creative processes. It is an evocative narrative, with a central theme - extinction…in the case of Silent River, of the River Red Gums, Murray Darling Basin, and Silent Night / Silent Life, the Barking owl population of The Otway ranges.

The innovations I have brought to my practice support my intentions to reinterpret the still life genre of art in the 21st century, through focusing primarily on ecology, craft based / mixed media sculpture and time based installation practice.

For my final exhibitions produced for the examination of this PhD, I have chosen to exhibit three artworks. One is the installation Silent Life, Geelong Gallery (which is an optional invitation for the assessors). The other two artworks, exhibited in the School of Art Gallery, RMIT University, comprise of one past work, Regeneration (2009), and one new work, XS, which lies on the gallery floor. This new artwork once again evokes the unswept floor, and incorporates the concept and series of the previous wall-based works, XS (2011-13), into an installation piece. This artwork has never been exhibited before.

The artists that I chose to support my documentation and research for this PhD, are in most cases well known established artists, whose practices are thoroughly documented. It was not my intention to overshadow my practice with the inclusion of these case studies, but to provide strong evidence of my own reinterpretation of the still life genre, and my placement in this field of knowledge. I feel humbled by this selected group of established art practitioners, who in most cases are supported by either major Australian or international galleries, and in some cases employ production teams.35 However, as a contemporary artist working outside of the mainstream

35 For example, artists such Ai Wei Wei, Cai Guo-Qiang, Damien Hirst, Anne Wenzel and Julie Bartholomew have production teams, or assistants, to facilitate in the ‘making’ of their artwork.
of fine art in Australia (particularly in ceramics)\textsuperscript{36}, I have tried to keep the integrity of my rural existence, and connect with my local community who understand what it means to live outside of the larger city environs. I have also been in the fortunate position of living half my week in central Melbourne, and travelling overseas for extended periods of time, to reflect on the environment where my work is focused. The University in which I work as a lecturer (1995-2014), in the School of Art, RMIT University, Melbourne\textsuperscript{37}, has also provided me with invaluable support, access to resources, and opportunities to share my ideas with students in fine art, and other artists and academics.

In the final chapter of Tim Flannery’s \textit{Here on Earth}, ‘An Intelligent Earth? What lies on the other side?’ the author includes a poignant quote by American ecologist Aldo Leopold, which I will repeat as a conclusion to this exegesis:

\begin{quote}
One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on the land is invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the mark of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Through researching and reinterpreting the still life genre of art, through mixed media installation art works about the environment, I hope to encourage others to think about how we can preserve these fragile microcosms in which we live, and put pressure on our governments to look at the bigger issues, such as world climate change, deforestation, and carbon emissions.

\textsuperscript{36} There are not many ceramicists in Australia who use ephemeral materials in their artworks. The production of non-commercial artworks also sets me apart from mainstream artists, who prefer to produce commercially viable artwork. The ceramics arena in Australia is very conservative, and prefers to focus on table sculptures or wheel thrown vessels, suitable for domestic interiors.

\textsuperscript{37} Formerly as a lecturer in ceramics and currently as a lecturer in Object based Practice.

3. Bibliography
Bibliography

The Nature of Things: Reinterpreting Still Life in the 21st Century

This bibliography has been separated into three sections: Books, Journals and Articles, and Websites. It includes all references and most reading material.

Omissions include exhibition catalogues, journals and websites that have not been specifically referenced in the text.

Books


Fuchs, R., *Cornucopia*, Exhibition catalogue, Damien Hirst, Monaco, Musee Oceanographique de Monaco, 2010.


Pliny, the Elder, *Naturalis Historiae Libri XXXVII*, Lipsia, sumptibus Teubneri, 1856-70.


*Spare Room*, Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2007.


**Journals and Articles**


Desmond, M., ‘Louise Weaver, No Small Wonder’, *ArtAsiaPacific*, 2006, p. 82.


Morton, A., ‘Just 1% of central highlands old growth survives’, *The Age*, 12 September 2011, p. 3.


**Websites**


Laurence, J., 'Vanishing: Stilled lives',

Lockwood, A, 'The Affective Legacy of Silent Spring', 
_Environmental Humanities_, vol. 1,

Loxely, A., 'A worthwhile chance with exquisite beauty in Weaver’s world',

Martin, C., ‘Sweet Success, Ken Yonatani’,

McLeay, Alexander (1767–1848), 'Australian Dictionary of Biography', 
_National Centre of Biography_, Australian National University,

Merriam-Webster, 'Merriam-Webster.com',


Museum of Victoria, ‘The Victorian Acclimatisation Society’, 

O'Sullivan, M., ‘Utopia in Southern Queensland – Cai Guo-Qiang: Falling Back To Earth’,

2003,

Raff, K., 'The Roman Banquet. In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History', 
_The Metropolitan Museum of Art_, New York, 2000,

The State of Victoria, ‘Pest Animals’,
State of Victoria Department of Primary Industry, ‘LCO300’,

Storer, R, ‘Heritage, Falling back to Earth’, [web blog], 17 March 2014,

Tate Modern, ‘Unilever series’,

Tate Modern, ‘The Unilever Series: Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project’,

The University of Sydney, ‘Natural History Collections’,

The University of Sydney, ‘Natural History Collections’,

Williams, J., ‘The meaning of wolves’, Minnesotans for Sustainability,


Young, D., ‘Acquiring the Friedrich Tippman Collection: Victorian Interest in Natural History’,

Young, J., ‘Gabriel Orozco: Asterisms’, 2012,
4. List of Images
List of Images

Unless otherwise stated, photographic images were taken by Sally Cleary
All images copyright of individual artists as stated.

Artworks by Sally Cleary, refer to Catalogue of Artworks - ADR

Sizes: H x W x D

Introduction: Context

No.s  
1  Boonah, view from house  
   Photo: Eliza Greenhatch  
2  Boonah, aerial view of house and property  
3.1 View of studio and farm shed – exterior  
3.2 View of studio – interior  
4.1 Bush land, Otways Forest Park  
4.2 Bush land, Otways Forest Park  
5.1 View of Boonah garden - introduced plant species  
5.2 View of Boonah garden - introduced plant species  
6.1 Indigenous birds – King parrot (mature male)  
6.2 Indigenous birds – Australian Magpies (immature)  
7.1 State forest with introduced plants  
7.2 Boonah Garden with introduced plants  
8 Kiln packed with porcelain  
9 Studio table exploring ideas  
10 Collection of organic and hand-formed detritus  
11.1 Exploring ideas for 1st project – The Unswept Floor, 2007  
11.2 Exploring ideas for 1st project – The Unswept Floor, 2007

Chapter 1: The Unswept Floor

Cover Image:
Heracleitus, ‘asarotos oikos’ / The Unswept floor, 2nd century CE  
Vatican Museum (Gregorian Profano Museum)  
Photo: arthistory390 Flickr

Fig.1 Heracleitus, ‘asarotos oikos’ / The Unswept floor, 2nd century CE  
Roman copy by Heracleitus  
Campo Marzio, Rome, Lazio, Italy  
Photo: Ed Cormany, flickr: ecormany
Fig. 2  Sally Cleary, The Unswept Floor, 2007, e.g.etal, Melbourne
Fig. 3  Sally Cleary, The Unswept Floor (Detail), 2007
Fig. 4  Gabriel Orozco, Exhibition view, 2012
   Asterisms 2012, Astroturf Constellations / Sandstars / Digital images
   Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin
   Photo: Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery
Fig. 5  Gabrielle Orozco, Sandstars (Detail), 2012
   Asterisms 2012
   Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin
   Photo: Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery
Fig. 6.1  Gabrielle Orozco, Asterisms -Installation detail, 2012
   Digital image: Astroturf Constellations (detail)
   Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin
   Photo: Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery
Fig. 6.2  Gabrielle Orozco, Asterisms -Installation detail, 2012
   Digital image: Sandstars (detail)
   Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin
   Photo: Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery
Fig. 7  Willem Kalf, (Dutch, 1619 - 1693) Still Life with Ewer, Vessels
   and Pomegranate, mid 1640s,
   Oil on canvas.
   Unframed: 104.5 x 80.6cm,
   Framed: 126.4 x 105.7 x 7 x 13.7cm
   Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Fig. 8  Jan van Huysum (Dutch, 1682 - 1749), Fruit Piece, 1722
   Oil on panel
   Unframed: 80 x 61 cm (31 1/2 x 24 in.)
   Framed: 99.7 x 81.3 x 6.7 cm (39 1/4 x 32 x 2 5/8 in.)
   Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Fig. 9  Sally Cleary, Mimesis – the Unswept Floor #3 & #4, 2008
Fig. 10 Sally Cleary, Agapanthus, 2008
Fig. 11 Willem van Aelst, A Vase of Flowers, 1663
   Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
   Oil on canvas
   67 x 55cm
   Photo: Sally Cleary
Fig. 12 Ricky Swallow, Everything is Nothing, 2003
   Laminated jelutong, milliput
   21.6 x 32 x 14cm
   ©Ricky Swallow / Permission: Darren Knight Gallery
Fig. 13 Sally Cleary, Oilcan with skull, 2011
Fig. 14 Christoffel van den Berghes’s, (Flemish, about 1590 - after 1642),
   Still Life with Dead Birds, 1624
   Oil on canvas
   Unframed: 72.4 x 100.3 cm (28 1/2 x 39 1/2 in.)
   Framed: 98.4 x 128.6 x 10.2 cm (38 3/4 x 50 5/8 x 4 in.)
   Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Chapter 2: Notions of Still Life and Landscape

Cover Image:
Ash Wednesday sentinel (Black Bower)
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 19  18th century study room, Ottoneum, Kassel, Germany
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 20  Otto Marseus van Schrieck, A Forest Floor of Snakes and Butterflies, 1670
Oil on canvas,
70 x 55 cm
Louvre Museum, Paris.
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 21  Rachel Ruysch, A ‘Forest Floor’ still life of flowers, 1687
Oil on canvas,
47 x 40cm
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Cat reference no. 64
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 22  Sally Cleary, Six pieces of slate, 2007

Fig. 23.1  Sally Cleary, Net, Notions of Still Life and Landscape,
School of Art Gallery, RMIT, 2007

Fig. 23.2  Sally Cleary, Net, Notions of Still Life and Landscape/ detail,
School of Art Gallery, RMIT, 2007
Fig. 24  Sally Cleary, Eighteen pieces of slate, 2007
Fig. 25.1  Sally Cleary, Still Life with boxes, 2007
Fig. 25.2  Sally Cleary, Still Life with boxes, detail, 2007
Fig. 26.1  Sally Cleary, Still life with books, 2009
Fig. 26.2  Sally Cleary, Still life with books, detail, 2009
Fig. 27  John Davis, Installation view - Presence, National Gallery Victoria, 2010
Mixed Media: Mixed Media: twigs, cotton thread, calico, bitumous paint. (Both artworks)
20 x 43 x 1086cm / 300 x 1070 x 90 cm
Private collection
© Penelope Davis & Martin Davis
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission Martin Davis

Fig. 28  John Davis, Nomad (Detail), 1998
Presence, National Gallery of Victoria, 2010
Mixed Media: twigs, cotton thread, calico, bitumous paint
163 x 140x 18 cm (variable installation)
Private collection
© Penelope Davis & Martin Davis
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission Martin Davis

Fig. 29  Rosalie Gascoigne, Inland sea, 1986
Weathered painted corrugated iron, wire
39.1 x 325.0 x 355.5 cm (variable installation)
Photo/credits: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1993
© Rosalie Gascoigne Estate/Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia

Fig. 30  Sally Cleary, Re-collections, RMIT Project Space, 2011
Fig. 31  Sally Cleary, Nests (Detail - #5-#7), 2011
Fig. 32  Sally Cleary, Blue Feather-Hattah Lakes, 2011
Fig. 33  Sally Cleary, Glass and specimen collection (detail), 2011
Fig. 34.1  Louise Weaver, Taking a chance on Love, 2003,
Hand-crocheted cotton and lamb’s wool over high-density foam, linen, silk, polyester, glass, rubber, plastic, acetate, aluminium, silver leaf, acrylic paint, wood, stone, polyester flowers cut and sealed with high-frequency sound waves (recouped from Issey Miyake evening bag), Eclipse lamp designed by Vico Magistretti, The Cero stool designed by Brian Steendyk, light, sound Melbourne
©Louise Weaver / Permission: Darren Knight Gallery

Fig. 34.2  Louise Weaver, Taking a chance on love (detail), 2003
©Louise Weaver / Permission Darren Knight Gallery

Fig. 35  Fiona Hall, Understorey (Detail), 1999-2004
Glass beads, silver wire, plastic.
Vitrine dimensions: 176 x 150 x 87cm
© Fiona Hall
Fig. 36  Fiona Hall, Tender, 2003-2005
US dollars
vitrine dimensions: 220 x 360 x 150cm
© Fiona Hall

Fig. 37  Ken and Julia Yonetani, Sweet Barrier Reef, 2009
Sugar, vegetable gum, polystyrene foam.
Dimensions: variable.
© Ken and Julia Yonetani / permission granted

Fig. 38  Sally Cleary, Black Bower, 2010
Fig. 39  Sally Cleary, Silent River, 2011

Fig. 40  Olafur Eliasson, Take your time, 2010
Tate Modern Turbine Hall, Unilever series
Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil,
aluminium, and scaffolding.
26.7 m x 22.3 m x 155.4 m
Photo: Studio Olafur Eliasson

Fig. 41  Ai Wei Wei, Sunflower seeds, 2010
Tate Modern Turbine Hall, Unilever series
100 million life-size porcelain sunflower seeds, hand made in
Jingdezhen, China
Photo: Tate Photography / © Ai Weiwei

Chapter 3: Mimesis

Cover Image:
Sally Cleary, Glass and Specimen Collection,
Re-collections, 2001

Fig. 42  Sally Cleary, Escarpment, 2007, Stephen Mclaughlan Gallery
Fig. 43  Louise Weaver, Invisible Bird, (Photographic Image), 1997
Hand crocheted cotton thread over Hoopoe bird,
Uppupa epops, sequins, glass beads, painted wooden base.
25 x 16 x 15cm
Collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
©Louise Weaver / Permission: Darren Knight Gallery

Fig. 44  Ricky Swallow, Killing Time, 2003-2004
Laminated jelutong, maple.
108 x 184 x 118 cm (irregular)
Purchased with funds provided by the Rudy Komon Memorial
Fund and the Contemporary Collection Benefactors’ Program
©Ricky Swallow / Permission Darren Knight Gallery

Fig. 45  Julie Bartholomew, I am Louis Vuitton, 2006
Porcelain
Life size
© Julie Bartholomew / permission granted
Chapter 4: Notions of Still Life and Landscape

Cover image:
Sally Cleary, Glass and Specimen Collection, 2011

Fig. 57  Ariela Nucci, Feathers, 2009
Porcelain, underglaze, shelf
10 x 120 cm
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission: Ariela Nucci
Fig. 58.1  Rachel MacBryde, Filing draws, 2009
Filing draws, mixed media
Variable dimensions
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission: Rachel MacBryde

Fig. 58.2  Rachel MacBryde, Filing draws (detail), 2009
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission: Rachel MacBryde

Fig. 59  Sally Cleary, Bonito Boxes (detail), 2009

Fig. 60  Sally Cleary, Remember me when I am gone, 2009

Fig. 61  Jayne Dyer, The Library of Forgetting, 2007, Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney
Mixed media including black cardboard moths.
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission: Jayne Dyer

Fig. 62  Jayne Dyer, The Reading Room (2 entrances), 2007
Second hand books
Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission: Jayne Dyer

Fig. 63  Sue Pedley, U’lva Marina, 2007
Mixed media including oyster shells and cuttle fish
Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney
Photo: Sally Cleary / Permission: Sue Pedley

Fig. 65  Ricky Swallow, Flying on the ground is wrong, 2006
bronze
Ed.12 + 5 AP
14.5 x 5.5 x 4cm
© Ricky Swallow / Permission: Darren Knight Gallery

Fig. 66  Mark Dion / William Schefferine, Wheelbarrows of Progress, Installation, American fine Arts, New York, 1990
Mixed Media: including wheelbarrows, stuffed toys, chainsaw, vegetation, press type on enamel, catfish, water filter etc.

Fig. 67  Mark Dion / William Schefferine, Wheelbarrows of Progress (Detail- ‘The Big Payback’), 1990
Wooden wheel barrow, toy truck, torch, saw, funnel, tools, printed matter, nails, rubber tubong, vice, clamp, spray paint can, cap, bumper stickers, presstype and ink on black enamel.

Fig.68  Damien Hirst, Mother and Child (Divided), 1993
Glass, painted steel, silicone, acrylic, monofilament, stainless steel, cow, calf and formaldehyde solution.
Two parts, each (cow): 1900 x 3225 x 1090 mm / Two parts, each (calf): 1029 x 1689 x 625 mm
Photo: Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates
© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2012
Fig. 69  Damien Hirst, For the Love of God, 2007
Platinum, diamonds and human teeth.
171 x 127 x 191 mm
Image: Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates
© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2012

Fig. 70.1  Fiona Hall, Paradisus terrestris, 1989-90
Paradisus Terestris, 1989-90
aluminium & tin
25 x 12 x 3cm
© Fiona Hall

Fig. 70.2  Fiona Hall, Paradisus terrestris, 1989-90
Paradisus Terestris, 1989-90
aluminium & tin
25 x 12 x 3cm
© Fiona Hall

Fig. 71  Fiona Hall, Fern Garden, National Gallery of Australia, 1997
Fern Garden, 1997
Courtyard commission, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Tree ferns, patways, gates, landscaping.
Variable size.
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 72  Theo Mercier, The 300 hottest girls in the world, 2013
Le grand MESS
Diposable lighters, shelf
70 x 150cm
© Theo Mercier / permission granted

Fig. 73  Theo Mercier, Le grand MESS, (the back), exhibition view, 2013
Mixed media, variable dimensions
© Theo Mercier / permission granted

Fig. 74  Theo Mercier in collaboration with Erwan Fichou,
Je ne regrette rien: No Future, Italy, 2013-14
Film photograph
160 x 200cm
© Theo Mercier / Erwan Fichou / permission granted

Fig. 75  Sally Cleary, Regeneration, 2009

Fig. 76  Sally Cleary, Regeneration (Detail 1), 2009

Fig. 77  Sally Cleary, Regeneration (Detail 2), 2009

Fig. 78  Sally Cleary, XS, 2011

Fig. 79  Sally Cleary, XS (Detail), 2011
Chapter 5: Silent Life

Cover image:
Sally Cleary, Silent Night (detail - Barking Owl), 2013

Fig. 80  Sally Cleary, Silent River (detail), 2011
Fig. 81.1  Sally Cleary, Silent Night, Day 1, 2013
Fig. 81.2  Sally Cleary, Silent Night, Day 4, 2013
Fig. 82  Giambologna, bronze birds, 1567
           Bargello National Museum, Florence
           Photo: Sally Cleary
Fig. 83  Sally Cleary, Large owl mould, 2012
           Plaster
Fig. 84  Janet Laurence, Cellular Garden (Where Breathing Begins),
           2005
           Stainless steel, mild steel, acrylic, blown glass, rainforest plants,
           Dimensions variable
           Collection: MCA
           Photo: Courtesy Janet Laurence
Fig. 85.1  Janet Laurence, Birdsong, Object Gallery, Sydney, 2006
           Assembly of taxidermised bird specimens from the Australian
           Museum, suspended acrylic ring, sounds of birdcalls and wing
           flutters.
           Exhibition audio: Ross Gibson in collaboration with Jane and
           Philip Ulman
           Photos: Keith Saunders / Permission Janet Laurence
Fig. 85.2  Janet Laurence, Birdsong, detail, 2006 / permission granted
Fig. 85.3  Janet Laurence, Birdsong, detail, 2006 / permission granted
Fig. 86.1  Diego Bonetto, Weed Terrarium, 5 terrariums, 5 tours and a
           world of Facebook friends, 2010
           Terrariums, soil from 5 locations in the Sydney Basin, guided
           tours of the locations, Facebook profiles of the plants visited,
           5 Terrariums.
           80 x 55 x 55 cm (each)
           © Diego Bonetto / permission granted
86.2  Diego Bonetto, Weed Terrarium (detail), 5 terrariums, 5 tours
           and a world of Facebook friends, 2010
           © Diego Bonetto / permission granted
Fig. 87  Sally Cleary, Weed pile (archival print), 2011
Fig. 88  Mark Dion, Concrete Jungle (The Birds), 1992
           Taxidermic birds, cardboard boxes, tires, toy truck, wash basin,
           motor oil canister, chair cushion, rolled carpet, linoleum flooring,
           wooden crates, aluminum cans, newspaper, plastic bags,
           containers, cups, bottles, other assorted rubbish.
           150 x 420 x 130 cm
Fig. 89  Mark Dion, Hemlock tree – work in progress, 2006
© Art21, Inc. 2007

Fig. 90  Mark Dion, Neukom Vivarium, 2006
Mixed-media installation, greenhouse structure: 80 feet long.
Installation view: Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle
Photo: Paul Macapia, Courtesy the Seattle Art Museum

Fig. 91  Belinde de Bruyckere, Cripplewood, 2013
wax, epoxy, iron, textile, rope, paint, gypsum, roofing
626 (h) x 1002 x 1686 cm
Photo © Mirjam Devriendt / Permission: Hauser & Wirth

Fig. 92  Belinde de Bruyckere, Cripplewood (detail), 2013

Fig. 93  Fiona Hall, Fall Prey – Installation venue (external view), 2012,
dOCUMENTA 13, Kalsau Park, Kassel, Germany
Painted timber pavillion ‘camouflage’ pattern
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 94.1  Fiona Hall, Fall Prey (detail), 2012
Pan troglodytes / chimpanzee, Equatorial Africa, 2012
IUCN threat status: endangered
Belgium military camouflage jacket (also worn in the Belgian
Congo, ‘jigsaw’ pattern), aluminium, leather gloves, teeth,
medical model heart, plastic toy, mobile phone, nails, bottle caps
180 × 78 × 35cm
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 94.2  Fiona Hall, Fall Prey (detail), 2012
Ailuropoda melanoleuca / giant panda, China, 2012
UCN threat status: critically endangered
Chinese military camouflage trousers, dominoes, mesh purse,
US dollar bills, electrical plugs, light bulbs, steel, wooden
Buddha figurine
163 × 45 × 26cm
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 94.3  Fiona Hall, Fall Prey (detail), 2012
Mustela lutreola / European mink, Europe, 2012
IUCN threat status: vulnerable
German military shirt (‘flecktarn’ camouflage pattern), teeth,
mink paws, bottle cap.
Photo: Sally Cleary

Fig. 95  Fiona Hall, Untitled [Mother], 2012 /13?
Mother energy drink can, video
20.7 × 14.8 × 1.5cm
Photo: Sally Cleary
5. Appendix
Appendix 1

Process

Process:
n. 1 a series of actions which produce a change or development.

Similes of process:
n. 1. action, course, manner, means, measure, method, mode, operation, performance, procedure, proceeding, system, transaction.
n. 2. Advance, evolution, formation, growth, movement, progress, stage, step, unfolding.

The following notes on process originated as a series of diary entries from 6 March 2011 - 31 July 2013. As such I have kept some of the spontaneity of the original writing in this chapter on Process. Within these short essays I discuss the processes involved in making my work and part of the involved in its fruition.

Notes on Process - Diary 6 March 2011

Most of my artworks start either with the act of collecting, or the process of making. In the former, the collecting often happens randomly and unpredictably, as the objects collected are found, and one never knows what they will find in advance. On some occasions the objects are actively searched for. For example a piece of furniture, such as a desk, chair, or mirror in a second hand store (refer to Regeneration, The Nature of Things, 2009), or looking for nests that have blown out of trees after a storm. These missions are not always fruitful, but encompass the process of searching. Search and search again – always looking for something new.

The collections I have amassed include seedpods from various trees and plants around my garden and surrounding environment (in both Boonah and Melbourne, and further afield). During the drought of 2007 the gum trees around Melbourne produced thousands of gum nuts, obviously aware of their own demise. Everywhere there was a gum tree planted, an abundance of gum nuts lay at its roots – perhaps to form a protective layer of mulch as much as to dispel its seeds. For me this was a time to gather green bags of gum nuts, to harvest and store for a later day. Other natural collections include leaves (which need to be preserved), insects (which must be dead and intact when I find them), feathers, twigs, bones etc. The human-made collections consist of blue twining, flattened bottle tops and tin cans, shards of ceramic and glass, rusted wire, and other discarded or lost objects. These objects are filed away for a future project.

This body of work started through the process of making objects from porcelain. Initially the objects developed through pinching the clay to make random organic forms. The process of making these forms was a type of meditation, to relax and settle my mind for further making. It was a process
I used to focus my thoughts in the moment, and reacquaint myself with the material – clay. These strange organic objects developed intuitively, without preconception, ego, or preciousness. They exist through the freeing of the mind, like a sketch or a doodle on a piece of paper that is created subconsciously. It occurred to me one day, as these organic forms evolved and multiplied, that the arrangement of these forms could be used to produce a visual language, by creating a link or connection between the various objects. It also occurred to me that the objects, depending on their structure – round, strait, curved, small, large, flared, flat – could be used to draw with, and even create text with. As objects in their own right they could be used to draw attention to the space around them, interact with other objects, and create narratives about the environment.

This new awareness of object and natural form, led to an awakening of the senses, and investigation of the natural environment, as though being viewed for the first time – a gum leaf on the road, a seed pod on a bush, the bone-like structure of a birch branch – and through this examination, the urge to collect, draw, and study in detail. This is the process of exploration.

In recollecting my projects over the past seven years, I might describe them as assemblages of objects examining local ecology and relationships between humans and nature. Through this description one might glean that the only process applied here is the act of assembling – moving the objects into place. In viewing the works, the other processes employed to create the works are perhaps not so obvious, but nonetheless just as relevant, or the outcome of the works would be different.

In the production of making ceramics, we refer to the term process to describe the method of making an object out of clay…pinching, coiling, rolling slabs, slab construction, throwing, wedging, extruding, joining, incising, piercing, smoothing, sanding, bisquing, glazing, firing…etc.

For someone trained or training in ceramics, these processes are the skills we need to learn in order to develop, refine, and control our forms, so that the end result appears effortless, enabling the work to evolve intuitively without struggling with technique, or lack of knowledge. This is the understanding I have of process.
Process is the spirit or soul of making. If one is in the mood for making, then process occurs easily. It is the extension of thought, with senses fully engaged, depending on the processes employed – touch, sight, smell, taste and hearing. And the other senses – intuition, emotion, being in the moment, alert, focused.

And then there are the processes of the mind, making decisions. Will I build this up or out? What materials will I use next? Is the tension right in this line? What will happen if I change this? These are the processes that will inform the finished work – the unseen processes of creative thought.

The first piece I made that was a collaboration of these three processes (collecting, hand forming, and exploration) was a work made in a wooden sieve, ‘$’, 2006. The sieve was found in a second hand store, to which I applied a wooden backing and painted in magenta paint (left over from a renovation) before I applied porcelain organic forms arranged in a dollar symbol. I also glued small pieces of natural detritus to the surface as a reminder of the ephemeral and transient nature of life. It was an obvious vanitas symbol embodying the still life genre.

**The Unswept Floor**

My first series of work for this exegesis, *The Unswept Floor*, 2007, was made for a small exhibition at e.g. etal jewellery store in Melbourne. This series was made up of six collections of objects – natural and hand formed porcelain arranged on small hand made wooden plinths, painted with sky blue milk paint.

The making of the plinths required measuring, cutting, and gluing. The surface colour and texture required the mixing of coloured powder pigments with a medium, then painting, sanding, and finally waxing and polishing. The result – a delicate soft blue smooth distressed surface, could not have been achieved any other way. The finish allowed the objects to rest lightly on the surface of the plinth as though floating in the sky, the sea, or on an aged painted floor or table. These works were originally assembled on black foam core board, which created an entirely different feel. The compositions, plinth size, colour, and objects were played around with at this stage and documented. This was the process of experimentation and examination.
Land and Identity
The next series, *Land and Identity*, 2007, took this idea a step further. This time the plinths were made from ceramics and resembled land formations: Escarpment, Dry Dam, and White Landscape were the largest works in this series. Other works were assembled on plinths sourced from the natural environment: a large piece of wood fungus, bark, timber, and rock. Offcuts of broken polished granite and marble were sourced and in one case a weathered piece of burnt foam rubber, found on a beach at Arakoon in northern NSW, was used to create a metaphor for the landscape. Objects of detritus sourced from my garden and surroundings in Boonah, were placed on these plinths to convey a sense identity – questioning the origin of the materials. In all the works there is a sense of fragility, and reflection on mortality – once again echoing the seventeenth century still life vanitas. In some cases the works express a sense of alienation and in others the forming of relationships. The hidden message is about belonging – do I belong here? This is the process of story telling.

Notions of Still Life and Landscape
The third series, *Notions of Still Life and Landscape*, 2007, explores the processes of installation art. This exhibition and body of work further investigates the balance between object and plinth, and the themes of Land and Identity, and The Unswept Floor.

The artworks that form this installation presented new challenges for me in defining time and space. The works are no longer freestanding sculptures to be viewed as individual works on a plinth. They now have a physical presence that demands a degree of interaction due to the physical scale of the artwork. The artworks within the exhibition must also have a relationship with each other, and thus become a much larger work that tells an overall narrative. I (we) identify each component of the installation (made up of several other components and processes) as a section of the overall installation and a part of the narrative.

Mimesis
Using a 50mm (portrait) lens, I explored the landscape, taking photos of my garden and the surrounding bush. These images encapsulate the environment by freezing the moment in time within the photographic still. This
The definition of the word ‘still’ was something I had investigated through earlier ceramic wall works, *Walls & Bridges* and *Past & Present*, 2005. The process of photography is an exploration of time and space, a form of mimicry which tells a narrative. The 50mm lens has a very narrow range of focus that I was interested in playing with in relation to the landscape, particularly evident in *Garden Series no.1*, where there is a lot of background and detail – grass, flowers, trees etc. By placing objects in the foreground of the images, the depth of field is increased and slightly confused, as the viewer moves from one focal point to another, around and within the image. The out of focus areas form a textural background of colour and movement – the focal points are still and restful, creating an unusual paradox in the images.

The inclusion of mixed media within the photographic images, such as feathers, insects, leaves, seed pods, porcelain detritus, and found objects such as broken tiles, shot gun cartridges, a burnt match, and a shearer’s comb, employ processes of assemblage and precise gluing, so that the objects appear to float on the surface of the prints. These objects are key indicators to draw the viewer into the image, questioning their origin and significance within the context of the photograph. The organic material usually speaks for itself – we identify a gum leaf or gum nut as being native. Only an expert in regional botany would know if the plants are indigenous to the area. Feathers and insects are more ambiguous, but are seen as a natural extension of the landscape, and therefore belonging. The handmade and found objects start a different kind of dialogue – a questioning of their identity: why are they here? Where do they come from? What do they signify? Are they important inclusions? Purists in ceramics or photography might also question the combination of mediums.

Later the box-framed prints are arranged in either a grid or in linear order. *Garden series no.2*, which are square in format (35x35 cm), form a grid of nine close up details of the landscape, juxtaposing line, colour, space and mixed media assemblage. The frames create a window-like perspective, as though one is looking out into the landscape.
These works were received with a mixture of praise and criticism. How do we know when new, experimental artworks are successful? The process of critical analysis is an important aspect of art practice, and feedback is usually a good measure for knowing when something is working or not. When the response is inconclusive, as it was in this case, is it enough for the artist alone to be satisfied with the results? I am left somewhat uncertain and perplexed about continuing this body of work for the time being, but feel that it is an area within the framework of my project-based, practice led research I would like to explore further, and will return to at a later time. In the meantime I will hang these works and think about these questions. This is the process of reflection and analysis.

**The Nature Of Things**

In 2009 I curated, The Nature of Things, an exhibition of works looking at objects and collections that reflect the natural world. As well as myself, I invited two emerging artists to exhibit alongside me, who explored similar themes—Ariela Nucci (ceramicist) and Rachel MacBryde (mixed media sculpture). This exhibition presented me with new options for exploring installation concepts.

Taking the idea of the photographic image one step further, I purchased a video camera to record the surrounding environment. I was interested in recording the changing landscape. My intention was not to create a movie, but to combine a sequence of almost still images that caught the movement of the wind, light, and sound. How far could I take the still life genre? By including moving images into the premise of still life, would I be breaking some unwritten rule?

My concept also included the projection of these images onto painted white furniture – a bedroom with a bonfire set upon a bed, a desk and chair, a mirror, and a wicker chair, an invitation to the viewer to sit beside the bed and watch the changing landscape. On the desk, a pile of notes with single words: sadness, silent, dreaming, slowly, remember, tomorrow, if, only, darkness, sleep etc. called for the viewer to read, interact with, and rearrange, if they chose to.
Regeneration begins with the image and sound of trees in the wind. Over five minutes the trees morph into images/sounds of fire (at which point the bonfire appears to burst into flame); rain and thunderstorms move over the landscape (a rainbow reflection appears in the mirror); and back to the wind in the trees.

The impact of this video on the viewers was quite extraordinary, moving some people to tears. Perhaps it was the freshness of the Black Saturday bush fires still in people’s minds (Jan 2009), or the references to mortality – the funeral pariah set upon the bed – and the narrative of grief, which resonated and moved so many. This work fulfilled my vision of connecting nature's physical forces with our own. The narrative: remind me I am a part of nature.

The processes of video production were new for me, and had to be learnt from beginning to end. This included the shooting and recording, and also the editing, using Final Cut Pro. This was an intense period of investigation and learning, and involved a large amount of trial and error, and the processes of learning and discovery. When planning the installation, I could visualise the setting, but had to source all the furniture. I searched through local second hand furniture stores until I found the right pieces – an old cast iron bed, a small writer’s desk, a simple wooden chair etc. The next step was to paint the furniture white.

Through the process of preparing the furniture, I had to wash the furniture first. It had not occurred to me that the process of washing was so closely connected to the symbolism of purification and preparing a body for burial. This process brought me to tears, as I washed away the grime and dirt it had accumulated over decades of its life, thinking about its history and who may have slept on the bed, sat on the chair, or studied at the desk. This cleansing process reminded me of my own grief, the passing of my mother eight months before, and connected with the theme – regeneration.

This work was partly inspired by the artworks of Sue Pedley, a Sydney artist who used the beds and bedroom settings at historic Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney in the exhibition Spare Room. In the works by Pedley, U’vla marina
(rooms 4, 5, and 6) engages the side tables, mirrors, and mantle pieces as plinths on which to display and reflect found and collected objects: an arrangement of cuttlefish on a circular table in the centre of one room, coloured wool on a mantle piece in another. The unusual display and collection of objects leads to inquiry of origin and meaning, and links the outside environment with the interior.

The concept of collecting is more evident (in *The Nature of Things*) in the work Bonito Boxes, a linear arrangement of eight black plastic recycled bonito boxes, with clear plastic lids. The compartmentalised boxes house a naturalistic collection of feathers, seed pods, bones, dried insects, petrified reptiles, leaves, moths, and porcelain twigs. The process in creating this artwork was formed intuitively and organically – through the need to contain and order, found organic objects. The bonito boxes provided the perfect receptacle for this purpose, and when arranged created a random order to the collection - referencing the ‘Wunderkammer’ collections of sixteenth century Europe, where natural collections of ‘curiosity’ whose categorical boundaries were yet to be defined, contained an assortment of objects which have no apparent relationship, except to the collector or curator. The clear plastic lids provide a barrier between the object and viewer, allowing the viewer to face their phobias without fear.

**Notes on Black Bower – Diary 16 August 2010**

This art installation, titled *Black Bower*, The Drawing Room, Melbourne, 3 August, 2010 is a work about regeneration. It depicts a two meter square of sphagnum moss, which had been excavated from my property in the Otways and relocated to the 2nd floor of building 4 at RMIT University, city campus. In the centre of the moss, which appears to be cut out, there is a 40cm square of burnt detritus, including soil, charcoal, leaves, sticks, grass tree needles, two tin cans and a glass bottle. These were all collected from a grass tree/native forest a few kilometers from my property towards the coast, which had been burnt in a controlled burn earlier in the year. The two tin cans have been patinated by
the fire, changing the identities of the objects. On the underside of one of the
tins is a clear outline, resembling a drawing of a large grasshopper, which must
have sought refuge during the burn off. The glass bottle came from a site nearby
that was littered with bottles – remnants from an earlier gathering in the forest.
I titled the work Black Bower, as this is also the home of the Satin bowerbird,
known for its collections of blue detritus, who would now have to find new nest-
ing grounds. The blackened square mimics both a nest and a hole where the
glass trees implode in the earth when they are destroyed. In most cases the
glass trees thrive in a wild fire, so the site (at this time) looks like a blackened
moonscape of colourful ‘living’ green and orange volcanic eruptions.

Also positioned on top of the moss and bower, were some pieces of ceramic
detritus, leaves, and animal forms, some white porcelain, others ‘sagger’ fired
pieces of terracotta.¹ These pieces of ceramic remind us of the creatures
and plants that were not so lucky, but have now been immortalised by fired
clay. Three feathers have been randomly placed to give regional identity to
the work– a white and yellow feather from a white cockatoo, a blue feather
from a crimson rosella, and a green feather from a King parrot. The objects all
rest, unmoving, unbreathing in the living space. A prickly tendral of blackberry
reminds us of the impact of introduced weeds.

On the adjacent wall, positioned in an arched wall niche, is a drawing of a
burnt out tree. The tree image comes from a different place closer to my
home, and has been clearly impressed on my memory as I walk past it on a
regular basis. It has been chosen for its monolithic sculptural qualities, and
is a reminder of the Ash Wednesday fires through which it was burnt in 1983.
This drawing pays homage to the trees that were destroyed in both of these
fires.

The drawing is significant in that a requirement of the exhibition was to
produce a physical drawing on one the walls of the stairwell. I wanted to
create a work about regeneration, and use charcoal as a medium to personify

¹ Saggar firing: ceramics fired inside a lidded ceramics container, containing combustible
organic material, to create a smoked effect on the surface of the ceramics.
the fire within the process of drawing. The drawing is also significant in that I am not accustomed to drawing in charcoal, particularly on such a large scale, but through a short practice session, discovered that one of its properties is that it can be easily removed with a cloth. This gave me confidence to render my ideas – if I didn’t like the result, I would simply remove it and start again. Thus the drawing was built up over three days, firstly drawing the tree almost illustrated in charcoal and watercolour crayons, secondly adding a background of saplings, and working the charcoal and crayon heavier over the original drawing, and thirdly by attempting to erase part of it. The result was very satisfying. It presented the trace of the tree, but still identifiable.

The theme also presented challenges for me, as I had planned to do an installation about the impact of fire on the landscape. The resulting work could potentially have been black and white, so the introduction of colour became an essential ingredient also. I introduced the colour through adding green tones of moss on the tree, and then by adding the moss to the blackened square.

The site I chose was an atrium style alcove at the top of the stairs leading up to the drawing studios on the 2nd level. This space was once an office, which had been removed, opening up the area to a glorious stained glass window broken up into 10cm squares of pink and green glass tiles. On the adjacent wall an arched niche presented the prefect place for a drawing. The site not only presented a colourful light filled space, but also conveyed a sense of spiritual reverence, by echoing a church interior. The green moss complimented the glass in the window.

My last challenge now, was to keep the moss alive. This required daily maintenance of watering using a spray bottle and watering can. Fortunately the site was nearby to my place of work, so it was possible for me to check on it initially at least twice day. Students were also encouraged to water the moss, so in a sense it became a communal garden. The moss had been laid on a bed of wood mulch, to keep it moist underneath, but the heat from the over lights and sunlight through the windows would cause the moss to dry out.
At night I wrapped the installation in a clear plastic drop sheet. This provided an almost hothouse effect, and lines of condensation appeared as a fine internal drawing under the surface of the sheet the next day. Visually the plastic canopy created a strange mystery to the object, which was obscured beneath the mist, so by accident the work took on a new persona. The moss survived reasonably well under these conditions and a small microcosm developed within the work, which could be observed on a daily basis. Small spiders began to make webs on the surface of the moss and no doubt other small insects and micro-organisms busily adapted to their new environment.

Over a period of weeks, the moss slowly began to turn brown, revealing other plants growing on the surface, which remained green. This state of change created another interest to the installation, and questions about how long it would last.

This presentation of creating a living still life was very cathartic and had a sense of healing. We are reminded of death, when we look at the work, and also of new life and growth.

Notes on Re-collections – Diary 15 August 2011

The exhibition, Re-collections, Project Space, RMIT University, gave me the opportunity to show a selection of artworks I had been producing post The Nature of Things (2009), and Black Bower (2010). The work presented in this exhibition consisted of seven sculptural artworks, and twelve photographs - the culmination of artwork produced between 2009 and 2011.

In the central axis of the gallery I set up seven wooden crates on stacks of flattened cardboard boxes, (which were remnant stock from my former tile making period, 1990-2000). They had been stored in my studio collecting dust for over a decade, and were the perfect height to float the crates 30cm off the floor. Within the boxes I assembled collections of natural detritus, such as birds nests, feathers, leaves, branches, rocks, insects, lizard and snake skins, skulls and bones etc., alongside human-made objects, such as old glass bottles, oil cans, a cigar box (containing clock mechanisms), rope etc.; and hand-made objects, including ceramic cups (given to me by friends), and the porcelain objects I had been making.
Seven nests is an artwork that presented itself to me through sourcing eight wooden crates, 30x60x90 cm, through a second hand furniture store in Melbourne. These crates, imported from an abandoned ceramics factory in France, allowed me to enlarge and ‘contain’ within the confines of the trays, some of the concepts I had been investigating in smaller studies within the confines of my studio in Boonah. On a studio visit in 2009 from two of my supervisors, I questioned the small 30x20 cm collages I had been developing. Were these compositions artworks? Did they have a place in my folio, other than investigative studies? The response to these questions was: yes they were purely experimental studies, equivalent to ‘drawings’ that led to the outcome of new artworks. I was not entirely satisfied with this answer.

These collages were formed on four long plinths (95x120x30 cm), which were purposely designed and built for the exhibition ‘Notions of Still Life and (2007), to display Eighteen Pieces of Slate. These plinths became invaluable props to facilitate my exploration of combining various objects that I had collected over the past three years. The width of the plinths, 30cm, was the perfect size to format collages on pieces of slate, tiles, trays, foam core board etc. that fitted into a 30x20 cm, or 30x30 cm format, and could be laid together side by side over a distance of 120cm / 240cm / 360cm or 480cm. These plinths were recycled and used in Bonito Boxes, and Remember me when I am gone (The Nature of Things, 2009) and again for Re-collections - Red Net (2009), and Four Blue Studies with Mesh (2008), both 95x120x30 cm.

The size of these studies is significant, as the plinth dictated the size of the artworks I was producing at this time. However the reality of these compositions, as spontaneous collages, of a predetermined size, was limited in its capacity to express the concepts about my relationship with the natural world. The wooden crates suddenly presented me with new choices, based on scale, and an intimacy that was lacking in the previous plinth based works.
Prior to the execution of this artwork, (and Nest #8), I had travelled into the
dessert regions of South Australia, to Arkaroola and surrounds, including the
Flinders Ranges. This trip also included driving through Murray River region
near Mildura, and camping at Hattah Lakes, Victoria. It expanded my view of
Australia, as a country with vast open spaces, and at this time a ‘flowering
dessert’, after significant rainfall. I was astounded by the number of weeds
growing in the dessert: paddy melons and daisies, amongst countless others.
I was also confronted by the long distances between towns and natural land
formations, and by the high number of skeletal remains – a reminder that life
should not be taken for granted in these regions of the world. It was an
experience that stayed in my consciousness for many months afterwards.
Re-collections was inspired by this journey, by the hundreds of photographs
that I had taken to help me remember this environment. It also helped me to
see the environment I was living in, and appreciate the diversity of wildlife and
plant species that surrounded me. It stimulated me as an artist and inspired to
make new artworks, and source new materials.

The eight ‘nests’, can be read as a sequence of images, or chapters in a book
of short stories. Each container is individual with its own distinct collection of
objects. And although they are positioned next to each other in a linear row,
they can also stand alone, as in the case of Nest #8. As a series of work they
tell a narrative of place – with obvious indicators such as the nests, cups and
animal remains. The title ‘Nests’ alludes to the idea of home, and security. The
warmth of the dark, worn, oil stained timber of the crates, also completed this
metaphor.

The title ‘Re-collections’, refers to both the collections of objects, and also our
association with memory. My plan for this exhibition was to include photographs
on the walls of the gallery, which referenced the containers on the floor, and
vice versa. These photographs were of landscapes, and documentation of the
completed nest /boxes themselves. During the process of editing my
digital images, I began to overlay the two themes (landscapes overlaid onto the
and discovered an unexpected, surreal relationship between the two images,
transforming the landscapes and collections into ‘dreamlike’ states. For exam-
ple the overlaying of the landscape (Hattah Lakes) onto the
image of three dimensional pod forms (Pods), presented the illusion of the
image wrapping around the forms.
These digital images were printed on archival paper, using a matt textured paper in one set, and a satin finish in another. They were hung on the wall without framing or glass to distract from the purity of the image and tactile surface quality of the paper.

The Project space gallery presented me with many choices for display, and it seemed appropriate for me to use this large space to transport all the projects I had been currently working on in my studio. These included two of the studies described above: *Red Net* and *Four Blue Studies with Mesh*.

Other works in this exhibition included, *Arkaroola*, a desert memento mori, contained in a long linear (glass fronted) cabinet supported by a metal stand. Orange sand was used to mimic the desert, and the objects placed in the sand had been collected from the desert areas I had visited. These were also juxtaposed with small ceramic objects, and formed a trail through the vertical cabinet. The cabinet was propped open for the duration of the exhibition, and often viewers left marks in the sand reminiscent of foot or animal prints.

*Glass and Specimen Collections* (2010) and *Chair with nests* (2011) formed a relationship at the back of the gallery, which I later referred to as ‘white desk and chair’. On the white painted furniture, previously used in *Regeneration* (2008), collections of plant and animal species, sit collaged together, as though preserved in glass containers. The glass containers include glass funnels, desiccator jars, a petry dish, a ‘preserve’ jar…which house natural objects, including small pine cones, a koala skull, insects, a butterfly collection, and the wings of a Crimson rosella (contained in a large green jar, sealed by fly screen mesh fastened with blue rope). On the chair sitting next to the desk, was a timber (vintage) ‘nail’ box, which contained six small birds nests. This work had a sense of tranquility and harmony, sadness and stillness, with the ability to arouse our senses and connect us with nature.

I was also invited to use the Spare Room, at the back of the gallery, a small dark enclosed space to produce an intimate installation. I exhibited *Silent River* in this space, as a compliment to the adjoining exhibition.
Silent River

Prior to this exhibition / installation, I had been investigating the use of casting slip\(^2\) as a means of making a cracked (unfired) ceramic floor, initially to place detritus into. The Spare Room gallery space, with its dark concrete floor, and small dimensions was an ideal space to experiment with these previous investigations.

The installation was made with minimal components – a liquid clay floor, a blue tarpaulin containing white painted sticks, some blue and yellow nylon rope (to suspend the tarpaulin above the slip), and a timber board walk, to allow viewers to enter the gallery space. The ambient soundscape of water, in various configurations, such as flowing, trickling, raining, gushing, sprinklers ticking etc., was also an essential component for creating another dimension to the artwork. At this time my nephew, John Nguyen, was completing his third year of a degree in Sound Art at RMIT University, and I asked him to compose a soundscape for this installation.

The process of collaboration is very interesting, and involves a lot of trust. That John was related to me was irrelevant, but came with conflicting feelings of hesitation and welcoming. What input could I have the production, and what would I do if I didn’t like the soundscape he composed? How do you acknowledge your family? Was this his project or mine? How do you work out the percentage of ownership in a collaboration, and who owns the copyright?

I did not want the soundscape to overwhelm the installation, but at the same time knew that the ambient sound would encourage the audience to linger in the exhibition, and in many cases people sat on the boardwalk for prolonged periods of time. The soundscape involved twenty minutes of field recordings overlaid onto a sonic music track, composed by John. It was a contemplative and evocative (complimentary) artwork. I had no doubts about his skills, and expertise, and was gratified by the experience of creating an artwork together, and the intimacy of this relationship.

\(^2\) Casting slip is a fluid clay body combined with additives, used in the ceramic process of slip casting into plaster moulds. The deflocculant additive (sodium silicate or ‘dispex’ (magnesium sulphate), reduces the water content needed in the slip to make it runny, by keeping the clay particles in suspension, and speeds up the material drying time.
The painted sticks had been presented previously in ‘Regeneration’ (2009), and wrapped in a blue plastic tarpaulin, to transport and store the branches in my studio. In this contained / preserved state lying on my studio floor, I imagined these sticks floating down a river. After visiting the Murray River in 2010, and experiencing the demise of the Red River Gums near Mildura, the concept of suspending the tarpaulin above a dry river revealed itself as a sound metaphor for the transience of life. Lighting, another essential component, could be altered to different levels to get the desired ambience, and cast the shadow of a canoe onto the slip floor.

Once the exhibition was installed and the slip floor poured (one hour before the opening), all the components fell into place. Unfortunately one viewer did not realize the floor was still wet, (as it appeared to have a soft marble finish when the slip began to set), and stepped onto the floor (in black suede shoes) five minutes into the opening of the exhibition.

Over the course of one week, the wet slip slowly dried and cracked. In areas where the slip was slightly thinner the cracks were smaller and web-like. The river of slip had transformed itself into a different landscape as large cracks appeared across the floor, reminiscent of rivers criss-crossing a landscape, with tributaries forming. Standing on the timber boardwalk only a few centimeters above the bed of white clay, there was a sensation of standing on top of a cliff looking down into a vast landscape below.

The response to this exhibition was quite overwhelming, and at the artist talk the following week over 50 people attended. I felt vindicated by my work, and the challenges of these two exhibitions. I had also made a major leap into time-based installation art practice.

Re-collections is a study of things found, collected and preserved, which remind me of different places I have visited. These collections are randomly categorised by shape, colour and material-drawing attention to the identity of the objects, questioning their origin and function. My work identifies many indigenous and non-indigenous plant and animal species, which I abstractly replicate in ceramics and juxtapose with other ephemeral objects to draw attention to their identity, fragility and beauty. I do not
discriminate between the forms, but seek to make a connection with our fragile existence, and relationship to the environment. Photography is a natural extension of this work.

The installation, *Silent River*, is a collaboration with my nephew, John Nguyen, who is currently completing his BA Fine Art at RMIT in Sound Art. This work recollects the seasonal creeks that criss-cross our arid land and reflects on recent droughts and wasteful usage of water, particularly the Murray River, where I visited last year. Sally Cleary, Catalogue extract, *Re-collections*, 2011.

**Notes on Silent Night, Diary 31 July 2013**
Developing this installation for Gallery 3 at Craft (formerly Craft Victoria), Melbourne, involved quite a lot of planning processes, and processes in clay modeling and mould making. My intention was to make an artwork about species extinction and habitat removal – particularly the demise of the Barking Owl, *Ninox Connivens*, species in the Otway Ranges of Victoria, where I have lived for the past thirteen years.

My study for the owl started with photographic images I had collected from books, journals, and the internet. Inspired by some bronze Renaissance sculptures of birds and owls I had seen at the Bargello National Museum, Florence in 2012, by Giambologna (1567), my aim was to develop a stylised life size model of the Barking Owl made from porcelain.

Healsville Sanctuary, Victoria, is home to a pair of Barking Owls, and I was fortunate to be able to have a ‘live encounter’ with their female owl, Millie, to take photos and record sounds of her chatting.\(^3\) The male was out of sight, ‘barking’ inside his (nearby) enclosure. I was later able to view the male owl, and gain of sense of his size and stature, which was quite imposing.

\(^3\) The female barking owls make a high pitched twittering sound, which sounds like she is chatting. The male owl makes a distinctive ‘dog barking’ sound, and during breeding season, a high-pitched ‘blood curdling’ scream.
From these images and impressions, I was able to complete my life size model, and make a large lightweight plaster mould, which I later used for slipcasting. Before making this large mould, I modeled several smaller versions to get a feel for the proportions and mould sections. The large mould had 30% paper pulp added to the plaster – which was very effective for lightness and slipcasting. The cast took over 10 litres of slip, and had to be set up on a makeshift jig, so that I could pour it out with relative ease. On a few occasions the weight of the slip inside the mould forced it to split and leak during the pouring process. Cracking and slumping were also problems I needed to overcome.

The floor took ninety liters of white casting slip, which was poured onto wet cement sheet (the floor was covered in plastic first). A timber boardwalk was made on site using decking material, and was elevated slightly above the river of slip. This elevation is critical to having a sense of standing above the river of slip. Lighting, sound, and the dark grey painted walls were crucial to the finished artwork. The soundscape incorporated my sound recordings, and was produced with the assistance of a sound artist John Nguyen, who had assisted me previously on Silent River. The soundscape was a variant of this work, edited from 20 minutes down to five, and included sounds of the Barking owls, calling to each other at night. The aim of the soundscape was to activate the work through headphones, otherwise it was completely silent – the reality of extinction. I employed a lighting designer to spot light the finished work, to present the owl, as though viewing it on a moon lit night, floating its shadow on the river below.
Appendix 2

Bush Tales

Diary Entries: Boonah 2005-2013
The following notes originated as a series of diary entries December 2005 - June 2013. Some of these diary entries have been interspersed in the main body of text, as anecdotes about place. Within these short essays I discuss my day to day / month-to-month / season-to-season observations about rural existence.

**December 2005**

I recall an afternoon several years ago walking down the orange dirt road outside my property in Boonah. The leaves on the road suddenly appeared before me as exquisite brightly coloured forms everywhere I turned. In this epiphany, I collected as many leaves as I could carry back to my house where I washed and laid them out on the kitchen table. For years I had walked down this road, never taking a second glance. Suddenly I realised the beauty in the detritus, which presented itself to me thereafter, every time I walked out the door. On this December afternoon I photographed these leaves and then preserved them by sealing them and storing them in a box away from UV light. On several occasions I have used these leaves in photographic works, ‘Silver Bower’ (2008) and mixed media compositions ‘Mimesis’ and ‘Garden Series I & II’ (2008), and as test panels, ‘Leaves in six movements’ (2005), which I hung in my hallway in front of a window to test the discolouration from UV light over time.

**31 August 2009 - Quarry Road**

There is a path through the forest – once with a sign that roughly spelled ‘quarry road’. It is a rambling one-car track, now impenetrable except for the weekend biker or hiker, or in my case, with my faithful hound, a regular rambler of the bush known as Boonah.

Jasper and I know just about every twist and turn along ‘quarry road’, or ‘Jasper’s track’ as I renamed it ten years ago when he was just a pup. His little legs and body just clearing the ground, trying to keep up with the pack, always trying to charge in front, wagging his white tipped tail like a sentinel. The track twists and turns along remnant forest. Remnant, that is, of the 1983 bush fires known as Ash Wednesday, which roared along the Boonah Road and all that surrounds, charring everything that lay before its wake. The old trees that bare the scars, and most of the survivors which are still alive, are broken like old marble statues that have survived the ravages of war and time. These trees
could tell a tale or two of pioneers, clearing the hills for timber, potatoes and peas, farming cows and sheep, and of course the fires.

Today the White cockatoos scream mercifully from above. The scout – as he is (not) affectionately known – alerts the flock to our arrival, and their screeches follow us down the track. Jasper barks back a stern reply: ‘go away, go away, don't come back another day’. But today his barks fall on deaf ears, and we soon ignore their raucous noise, distracted by other details the bush has to offer, knowing that eventually they will lose interest and leave us alone.

We round the bend, and now follow the creek, which is moving at a slow gurgling pace. The creek's flow is seasonal, and on this spring day is happily flowing after 10mm of rain last night. It is heading off to the sea 20km from here, but will be caught by the Painkalac Dam on its way.

Blackberry tumbles along the edges – brought here by the birds after a joyous feast of berries. The first new shoots appear on its prickly, spiky limbs that reach over in our direction. There are signs of it poking its head up through the track in its conquest to cover the earth. Thoughts of poison cross my mind – I must come back with the spray pack one day soon. I will wage environmental warfare on my natural enemies, if I remember next time.

Stinging nettles line the other side, as though creating a slightly threatening path, but no harm comes to those who ‘do not touch’. The ground is covered in sphagnum moss, spongy and green, that has become a soft carpet of fecundity, rich in humus and moisture. Fresh motorbike tracks cut up the surface and carve their way through the moss and clay, I feel disgusted by this brutal intrusion into my peaceful oasis. Can't they see the beauty in this place? Apparently the mud and the noise are all they appreciate, polluting and violating this natural place of bird sounds, wind, frogs, and rain on the leaves – a forest that sleeps but never rests.

A large tree branch lies across the track, a reminder of the wild storms that thrash through the valley – but today it is but a soft murmur and we are protected beneath the swaying canopy. I walk with trepidation on a windy day, and never venture along the path that is my friend today. They say that
'widow makers' do not fall on windy days, but I do not believe this old bush
tale for many a loud crack have I heard on such days as this. I hear the wind
in the trees, crying out across the forest: ‘fly away, fly away, please come back
another day’. Respect for the forest includes the forces of nature that abound,
and I fear that no one will hear my feeble cries, and my faithful hound will be
left without his master.

The branch is wider than most of the trees around, and has brought down
other saplings in its wake. The mighty girth of its body stands beside me,
broken but not yet spent. Its wounds will heal in time, and the hollows of its
torn off limbs and torso will become home to small marsupials, reptiles, and
birds, protected from the elements. I have to climb up onto the branch to get
across, so I feel confident that the natural fence will at least deter most of the
motorbikes at this point. As I remove a bark ramp I lament that one or two
trail-bike riders will always persevere to create destruction further along the
track. Jasper clears it in one almighty leap, and sprints off up the hill.

Soft ‘blanket’ tree foliage and lemon scented ‘bootlace’ bush line the fringes.
The gully falls away quite steeply to my left, and the track begins to decline
away ahead of me. I am aware of the gorge below with five metre tree ferns
reaching for the sky, sheltered from the sun by the forest of Grey and Manna
gums. I can just see out to the other side, through dappled sunlight and shiny
shimmering leaves. It is possible to see from here how easily it would be to
get lost in the bush, once you leave the safety of a track or creek, with nothing
but trees and similar vegetation as far as the eye can see.

Another tree blocks my path. This time it is too large to climb, but a natural
arch allows us to climb beneath its massive structure. I have to bend down
and twist my body against the mossy rock wall to continue the journey to the
quarry. It is not far now. The track is narrower from here on, as the road has
eroded on one side and the undergrowth is slowly reclaiming its territory.
Ferns grow out of the side of the bank, holding the mud stone in place.

Eventually the track leads us to an open clearing, a little boggy under foot.
Scotch thistle rosettes are abundant at my feet, warning me of the wild weed
season ahead. Thoughts of chemical warfare once again fill my head, perhaps
a shovel and gloves will suffice. None the less it is a reminder of man’s intervention, bringing stray plants that don’t belong here.

The quarry looms around me, ten metres of cliff face cut away from the ground on which I stand. I feel as though I am standing in the middle of an ancient amphitheatre now abandoned, but reclaimed by the land that was once destroyed by heavy machinery and dynamite. Today it is a sunny reprieve to a forty minute walk with exposed sky – a bright blue, smattered with white woolly clouds. Jasper leaps with joy, and races up the bank ahead and then rushes down again, what fun, what freedom. Black cockatoos softly cry out high above us in the treetops at the head of the ravine. I cover my eyes to look in their direction, but see nothing of their sleek black and yellow bodies and primeval heads. They are my favourites, these B52’s of the forest, they are the real owners of this land.

The Yellow-tail Black Cockatoos are a frequent visitor to this area, particularly over the summer months when the local radiata pine plantation is in full seed. The species abundant to this area only eats seeds, as apposed to its slightly northern neighbour that eats insects. Its bill is sharp and pointy, and well fitted for biting into the cones of banksias¹ and some say the only native Australian bird capable of breaking into the seeds of pines, which are why they are nesting here. It looks like they have made a home in one of the tree hollows high above me, where hopefully they will breed over the spring.

Other fauna to inhabit the bush are Black-faced wallabies, and Grey kangaroos. The bush around here is quite open, so there are many paths leading away from the track and the sound of roos thumping and thrashing through the forest, alerted by our presence, is familiar to my ears. Every year Monash University traps marsupials along Quarry Road, collecting data on the number of ‘antechinus’ and bandicoots that live in the region², leaving behind trails of fluorescent pink and orange plastic ribbon. Fears for their numbers declining are associated with the increase in foxes and feral cats that also live in the area and hence a number count is crucial to their survival. I have never

seen a Long-nosed bandicoot that is supposed to live in the area, but evidence of its snout, digging into the dirt looking for worms and other insects is evident along the gullies, as are the echidnas, native bush rats, and not-so-native rabbits.

The wind begins to pick up, and signs of more threatening clouds start to fill the sky. This signals the time to start heading back, hopefully before the first drops of rain begin to fall. You never know when the weather will change here, as it is not specified on any weather map, it is just a feeling, when the temperature suddenly drops. At first an eerie silence – the calm before the storm, you know then it is time to head for home, or pull the washing from the line. A storm can appear from nowhere in no time at all, and disappear as quickly as it arrived – particularly at this time of year. There is no need to rush home today, but even so I quicken my pace in anticipation.

Rain is a common occurrence in the Otway Ranges. This is a blessing in Victoria where most of the State is suffering from its worst drought in 80 years. Meanwhile our 10,000 litre tank is in a continuous state of overflow. We do not boast however of dams filled to the brim and creeks gushing with water, as we know that rain is but a passing phenomenon, and cannot be counted on over the summer months. In fact the rain will slowly diminish and cease altogether by January, so the spring rain is essential to filling all of the grounds orifices and pores. In previous years the water table had become so low, that spring plantings had little chance of survival, however the past couple of years (2008-2009) have been on the increase, and give us hope for the future. Once the Otways, as this mountain range in south western Victoria is known, was notorious for its high rainfall and temperate rain forest. Land slippage was common on steep pastoral land, sometimes receiving 100mm overnight, and 300mm over 3 days. The value of trees was only rediscovered in the early 1990s in this area, under a State Government scheme (Department of Primary Industries and Energy), to encourage tree farming for commercial production on cleared agricultural land.\(^3\) This enterprising activity also proved to be beneficial for improving farm productivity by protecting valuable topsoil

and providing shelter belts for stock. Today this is still seen as a ‘green’ activity by some traditional farmers, who believe that land clearing is a safe and non-invasive farming practise suitable for ‘environmentally fragile’ areas.

The thought of another summer fills me with trepidation. It was only the beginning of this year that wild fires raged through the north west of the state killing hundreds of landholders. It is the curse of living in the bush. Bushfire survival plans are a way of life but don’t necessarily save lives, as we learnt the hard way from Black Saturday in February 2009. Temperatures soared into the 40s with strong northerly winds creating the perfect climatic conditions for a natural catastrophe.

Another fear I have of summer is the number of venomous snakes that live in my territory. Tiger, copperheads, and black snakes are all regular visitors to my garden and surrounds and all have a potentially deadly bite. A human-made pond, whose aim is to attract native birds and frogs, is also a big attraction to tiger snakes on a hot summer day – just passing through. Cold blooded by nature, water quenches their thirst and regulates their body temperature, and is a banquet table of amphibian delights. Nocturnal by nature – to hunt and mate, it is not uncommon to see one crossing the road during the middle of the day, soaking up the warmth of the sun’s rays in anticipation for an active night ahead. One thing about snakes though, is that they always catch you by surprise. It doesn’t matter how alert you are, you never expect to see one when you do. Many dogs have become victim to an aggressive tiger snake, raising their cobra like heads before their deadly strike. They say one must stay calm in the event of a venomous snakebite, slowing down the deadly venom on its way to the heart.

A clap of distant thunder punctuates the air with a sprinkling of light rain. The forest suddenly becomes alive with the sound of birds, seeking shelter and excited by the days foraging and events ahead. Evening shadows reclaim the track, earlier a joyous dance of light, and the old war wounded trees appear more threatening as descending wind, rain, and hastening twilight begin to settle on the forest. However I feel safe within its sheltering cocoon, and glistening mossy track leading the way home.
Oh bush land, oh mighty forest, what will become of you? What will become of me? The Otway Ranges have recently been declared a National Park (2008), and logging has been stopped forthwith and indefinitely. This is a start to making peace with the forest and devastation it has endured over the past 100 years. As for motorbikes, the local Department of Environment and Sustainability is looking for ways to incorporate their malicious activities harmoniously into the plan - a confusing conundrum by all accounts.

13 September 2009
Rural land maintenance plays an important role in managing freehold land in many cleared landholdings in Australia. As the small farms become uneconomical to graze for livestock or maintain crops, hobby farmers are becoming custodians of the land, by vegetating and weeding the unfertile pastures, which have slowly been degraded by overstocked and over-sown paddocks.

My home is a colourful oasis amongst the forest. The garden is planted out with non-indigenous flowering shrubs, trees, and ground covers, where even the native plants are introduced for their splendid foliage and array of brilliant flowers, colours, and unusual sculptured shapes … callistemon, grevilleas, correas, and banksias. The native birds have a field day sucking the nectar from red hot pokers and agapanthus, and foraging through the forget-me-nots and daffodils. A sacred bamboo growing in the courtyard, amongst arum lilies and covered by ornamental grapevine, is home to a protective blue fairy wren, who spends most of his day pecking at his own reflection in the window.

Wild daffodils grow along the road verge, planted many years ago, maybe just a handful then. Today they spread almost 50 metres and there are over 500 bulbs. The old garden, where the original house burned down in the 1983 fires, is a mass of spent fruit trees which are home to wild bees during blossom season, and an enormous bright red and yellow Datura bush, which flowers most of the year, dangling almost to the ground from its heavy over-burdened branches. Foxgloves, Aeonium, and Shasta daisies abound, potentially becoming invasive weeds in the surrounding landscape.
I saw a Satin bowerbird the other day, my first real glimpse of an adult male. The young bowerbirds are frequent visitors to the garden, hopping around looking for fruit and insects to feast on. They are a soft olive colour, and quite plump for a medium size bird (about the size of a crimson rosella). From time to time we discover their ‘practise’ bowers under the trees and bushes, a collection of precious blue objects – plastic pegs, roofing foil, and baling twine. In the ten years I have lived here, my one desire is to discover a real bower in the bush, and to see an adult male. For some reason, once they reach maturity they suddenly become frightfully shy. Rare as it is to see one foraging in the grass, I spied one through the lounge room windows. He was the colour of the darkest navy blue blazer – shiny and bright in the morning light. No wonder they are called satin – blue satin is the only way to describe this lustrous coat of feathers, and his beak – the brightest shade of golden yellow. He was about the size of a crow, but his body, like the olive juveniles, was plump and unusually proportioned for a large bird. I wonder what had brought him out of his secretive home in the bush, along with his brood of at least five other chicks, and perhaps his mate – does he suddenly feel safe here, in the open but protected environment of our garden?

Locals complain they are always eating their fruit and vegetables, but I don’t mind, as long as they leave some for me. Their favourite meal at the moment seems to be the bright yellow flower head of the succulent aeoniums, which grow in all the nooks and crannies I can find to plant them in. I have seen them feasting in the fern and succulent garden, adjacent to the glass walled bathroom.

My neighbours are all divided about the type of garden one should plant. My closest neighbour, Dave, will only grow the indigenous plants that grow on his property – Blackwoods, Peppermint gums, a native clematis vine and Kangaroo apples are about the extent of it. Oh, to be so pure. Others will only grow natives, but many of which are not indigenous to the area. Much of my garden was planted before my time, and even though I recognise the incongruity of English plants in this brown, green, and grey Australian landscape, where clearly they are foreigners (and potentially can become weeds) – it is the colour of these contrasts which excites my senses, and clearly the birds love them also.
Honeyeaters spend hours every day during the early spring probing their long thin beaks into the flowers of the Red Hot pokers, effectively sucking out the nectar. Eastern spinebills, wattle birds, and New Holland honeyeaters cling on tightly to the thick stalk, sometimes two abreast, scouring each plant and unwittingly collecting pollen on their faces and body, transferring it to the next flower, and so on, nature’s way of pollination. Later in the season they will come back to feast on the Agapanthus when they come into flower.

Agapanthuses are classified as an invasive weed, as their seed heads can be dispersed through the waterways and travel kilometres through the bush. These joyful plants with colourful mauve bell shaped flower heads, line the verge of our property, and could easily run away each year if not diligently deadheaded before they go to seed – just another task to be completed during the gardening year. We are more than aware of the potential hazards of plants that have escaped the borders of the house surrounds, such as the malicious blackberry plants that are found along the roads, fences and tracks. The birds of course love the easy pickings of the bountiful fruit produced each autumn – particularly the King Parrots and Crimson Rosellas, who fill their crops for later. The only way to control the thorny blackberry which spreads and grows at an alarming rate, is through continuous spraying, as the birds spread their seed every day when in season, so the task is never ending. Fortunately in the forest itself the blackberry will not flourish due to the lack of sunlight, but is devastating to the regional wildlife and gullies as it harbours foxes and rabbits.

1 November 2009 – Weeds

I have never had much interest in weeds, until now. The suburban backyard is home to many a weed and can be a nuisance at times, however beyond the occasional curse of pulling out yet another weed, no backyard gardening could have prepared me for the onslaught of weeds I was to face over the last ten years of my life.

This land I inhabit was once covered with native vegetation – Blackwood and Grey gum forest as far as the eye can see, broken only by the ocean on the horizon. Understory of Prickly moses, Blanket trees and spindly wattles fill in the gaps, and the creek beds are fringed with tree ferns and mosses.

The first white settlers cleared the land for sheep and cattle grazing, forests were harvested for its timber, and pasture was planted. Future generations would log the land, wait for it to regenerate and log it again. The advantage of logging native hard wood is that it grows to a reasonable size in 15 years, so over 100 years this would have been a reasonable supply. Today plantation hardwoods are grown around the district, and pruned on a regular basis to ensure straight unknotted timber. I once asked a plantation owner how often they had to prune the branches. Branches grow all the time of course, so tree growing can become a fulltime occupation for some.

The pocket of 50 acres of cleared land, to which I lay claim on paper, is often referred to as Scotland, due to the mist and fog that consumes it over the winter period and early spring. In the summer it is not the weather that would make the Scot’s homesick – it would be the Scotch thistle that spreads its purple flowered seeds akin to a snowstorm of white fluff, and turns them into spiky prickly weeds. The Scotch thistle (Onopordum acanthium L.) has to be the bane of my life – and in my opinion has no endearing qualities. It sticks up like a sore thumb everywhere it can find a spare bit of earth, and it’s seeds can lay dormant under the ground for up to eleven years. One year of seeds, eleven years of weed – not a happy prospect for a land custodian.

The Scotch thistle is believed to have been introduced to Australia as an ornamental plant of Heraldic significance and to remind Scots of their heritage. Records show that it was naturalised by 1856. There are at least fifteen varieties of thistle that grow in Victoria, and they can be annuals, biennials, or perennials (which grow from roots of rhizomes) on a yearly basis. Poisoning is the most effective way of eradicating this weed. However, as it is an annual or biennial, cutting off the flowers before they seed will also remove the potential for future propagation.

The list of weeds, which infest this relatively small acreage, are significant in number and many are classified as noxious. This list includes my second favourite weed, Ragwort (Senecio jacobaea L.), which is notorious in Victoria for its persistence in the face of extermination. This lively, yellow flowering plant can produce up to 250,000 seeds (per plant). These seeds can stay in the ground for up to seven years, so only the most diligent land-carer will succeed in its eradication (given that his/her neighbour is equally as diligent). Poison seems to be the only effective means of extermination, as hand-pulling, which may seem easy enough, is useless if any part of the plant or root is left behind.

4 January 2010
Walking through the forest yesterday, we came across a new track. It felt like a premonition in a way, a moment in time that determined that I look up the slope, as though for the first time, and see a group of tall tree ferns. We had had a big storm the day before, so the forest still smelt fresh, and rich with earthy smells of humus and dampness from the torrential rain. Everything looked bright and green and brown. So when I looked up, I felt an overwhelming urge to explore and stand under the ferns which reached at least three meters high, and that was when we discovered the track.

Standing several metres above the quarry road, it was strange how different everything looked. The new path was not very obvious, but soon was apparent by the flatness and the way it cut through the terrain. Looking down now toward the tree ferns, the light was filtered through the fronds and branches of the forest, and I could see clearly every tree, fern, and shrub, every texture – thin and thick – of grasses, bark, and foliage. The Prickly Moses has little red berries sitting amongst its needles, a bit of colour piercing the monochromatic landscape. Grasses have wrapped themselves around fallen tree branches, and look like large nests for native animals, that might need to hide or shelter on the forest floor.

This track would once have been another road leading up to the quarry. It would also have been used for clearing trees, and even now the landscape is fairly sparse, and easy to walk through. There are several enormous tree
trunks, including a tree which appears to be a burnt out skeleton, with only a shell for its base. It reaches higher than any tree around it with a full canopy of leaves – a conundrum of life in the forest – the one that survived Ash Wednesday and beyond.

There is a noticeable absence of blackberry and other noxious weeds on the upper levels, perhaps due to the lack of disturbance to the ground. This land looks like it has not been traversed for many years, and now we are discovering the forest again – explorers in time. We delight in this sensation of seeing new mosses and habitat that have been allowed to grow and recover without interference. There are many paths of animal tracks crisscrossing the road, no doubt made by kangaroos and wallabies, and the odd bandicoot and echidna leaving their holes and maps etched into the ground.

Eventually we come to a fork in the path, and find we are connected to a more familiar, but less popular route to the upper shelf of the quarry. High up on the hillside we are level with the treetops, home to the cockatoos. The track is not well worn, but it is easy to follow and eventually leads us down the slope to the bottom of the rocky cliff face. No wild life is observed, less a small curled up copper coloured snake, sunning itself in the overcast light. It appears oblivious to our presence, and we stand our distance, instinctively nervous of its presence but unafraid – a baby Copper Head shining in the sunlight presents no threat. It is at home in the apron of the quarry and forest.

Scotch thistles are now in abundance, as the quarry and forest clearing provide an open space in which to seed and flourish. A haven for weeds left unattended, ready to claim this new land as its own. Blown by the wind, the balls of fluff have miraculously found their way from farming land through an obstacle course of trees and shrubs, to lay down their roots for a permanent stay a mere kilometre or two away. We start to kick up the roots of these nasty invaders, trying to block the cycle, knowing that we have already been defeated by spent seed-heads and a growing army of thistles that surround us. We leave preparing for battle another day.
31 January 2010

Two gang gangs have moved into the area – this is a momentous occasion. Gang gangs often travel through the area – their voice is like a baby calling gently in the wind. The males are usually a light grey with rose coloured heads, and are about the size of king parrots - larger than a rosella, and smaller than a black or white cockatoo.

The world of parrots is one of colour and delight. Being able to observe their daily activities is a treat to behold. Chez Boonah – the name of the bird café at ‘Boonah Vista’, my rural paradise, is a popular water hole/breakfast and dinner oasis, 11 km (as the birds fly) to the coast. It is a haven for hundreds of birds, ranging from tiny Firetail Finches, Blue Wrens, Yellow, Pink and Red Robins, Welcome Swallows…to the majestic King Parrots, with tangerine heads and breast, and graceful Black Cockatoos. The White ‘cockies’ are not so popular, and are met with a barking dog upon their noisy arrival. I’m sure it is just a game to stir up Jasper, who delights in chasing them; of course they both know the chances of him catching one are nil. Kookaburras grace the fringes, looking for snakes and lizards, and Wedge Tail Eagles nest nearby, frequently hovering overhead in search of a rabbit or bush rat.

The arrival of these two gang gangs was a surprise to say the least – (a) because they seem to have moved in, and (b) they have the most amazing colouring I have ever seen. The male has a dark, very bright crimson face and comb. His feathered coat is a combination of dark and light grey, of eye-catching contrast. His mate is much paler, but strikingly beautiful, with a soft rose breast. They are a handsome couple and don’t seem to be overly shy for two wild strangers, who seem to have been accepted by the neighbourhood of birds. These two are not the ‘quiet babies’ of the passing travellers, but sound more like a squeaky gate, so it is easy to tell when they are around, even when you can’t see them.

The pond outside the kitchen window is a perfect summer swimming pool-come-drinking fountain for most species of birds who live in the area. A quick bath and drink before retiring for the evening. The gang gangs have started turning up just before dusk each night, a photographic opportunity if ever there was one. How privileged I feel to have been given the chance to share in their world, even from the barrier of my house – but to be observed also.
14 February 2011
This year a flock of gang gangs has settled on our property, there must be at least ten, feeding in the Blackwoods adjacent the house and studio. This is the first time we have had so many, but we welcome these cheeky parrots, with their soft crying calls, the sound of creaky doors. Last year there was a beautiful pair, with dark grey feathers, and the male had a comb the colour of pomegranate. The female was a lighter grey with a rose coloured chest. They were frequent visitors to our pond and king parrot café. Who knows, perhaps they went home for the winter, and told their friends about this paradise in the Otways?

15 February 2011
This summer has been unseasonably wet. The grass has not stopped growing since last winter, which is great for the sheep, who are all looking healthy and well fed. The downside is the amount of mowing and weeding that is required when the ground is moist 24/7. This year the Ragwort has been the worst I have ever seen it. In 2001 we fenced off a gully that had severe tunnel erosion. This is caused when the land has been cleared of trees and shrubs, and water makes a path across and through the landscape. Eventually holes form, which become larger and deeper over time, and start to flow under the ground, making more holes and longer tunnels, which (in time) collapse and form new gullies.

So we fenced off the gully and started to plant trees and understorey plants to regenerate the land and help restore, or at least halt, the erosion. The first year we planted one thousand trees, but lost over half to drought. Remarkably some of these trees have made a come back, after sitting dormant and dried out for a couple of years. We waited a few years and planted another hundred, not wanting to take too many risks this time. With a couple of years of good rainfall the remaining trees are flourishing, but unfortunately so is the bracken, blackberry and ragwort. This year I spent two weeks pulling out the ragwort, just before it started to seed. There must have been over one thousand plants, raising their bright coloured heads to the sun, some with stalks as thick as a sapling. The blackberry is growing wild also, entangling itself amongst the bracken, where even the kangaroos dare to tread.
Yesterday I sprayed a patch of blackberry, which must have been eight meters long and four meters wide. Ripe berries had already formed from its flower heads, and I was torn between spraying the plant and eating it. After a few mouthfuls, the spraying commenced and I said goodbye to the vigorous spiky plant with its sweet nutritious fruit.

**28 October 2012 – Spring has sprung**

I awaken each morning to the sound of bird song. Barely a ray of sunlight through the venetians and the world of Boonah is coming alive…a cacophony of melodic notes, chirping, twittering, tweeting, and a high shrill whistling, this would be the Fan Tail Cuckoo, whose call resembles a train whistle… the train ready to depart. He is calling for a mate, and can be heard from early morning to dusk and sometimes during the night. The raucous wattlebird, laughing kookaburra and the warbling magpie create a multitude of layers within this spring time orchestra.

The birds are not the only fauna or flora to be aroused by the longer and warmer days. The garden has burst into a colourful market place of blue and purple iris, pastel forget-me-nots, the scent of jasmine and bouquet of arum lilies. The wattle from the Blackwoods has already dropped, leaving mostly the exotics in the garden to spread their petals ready for the pollination. Along the roadside sprinkles of white (daisy) and yellow (‘egg and bacon’ bush), provide a welcome accent to the almost monochrome bush. Yesterday I saw a pair of gang gangs feeding on the wisteria, and a wattlebird sucking out the nectar from a red hot poker. There are bees foraging in the herb garden, and swallows nesting under the rafters. If I leave the studio door open for a minute they are in, in a flash, looking for a cool dry place to make a nest of mud and straw to lay their eggs. Down in the paddocks the sound of lambs and their mothers can be heard continuously calling out to each other in voices distinctly their own.

The call of the kookaburra signals its territory, and often a chorus transpires. They are also on the hunt for snakes, which are coming out of hibernation and hatching out in good supply at this time of year. I have heard that kookaburras eat up to ninety percent of the hatchlings, which makes me feel a bit more relaxed, and I welcome their presence in the land of Tiger snakes. The Red
Belly black snakes do not bother me, even though they themselves are highly venomous. They stay very still, and rarely show any sign of aggression when encountered at close proximity. A slow turning of its body reveals its blushing underbelly, and that danger is a possibility, before it slowly uncoils itself and moves away. The ‘Tigers’ are the ones to watch out for. Not only are they highly venomous, but also extremely aggressive, rearing up like a cobra, preparing to strike or take chase. The small wrens set off the alarm with their high-pitched repetitive tweeting. The problem with snakes passing through our shared habitat is that they always catch you by surprise. When you have your guard down and least expect to see one, they are suddenly right there!

The local weeds are already in good supply, so any spare moment of time is taken up terminating their existence…pulling, digging, spraying…and the grass grows before your eyes, millimetre by millimetre, until the next week it is suddenly 30cm high. The faithful ride-on mower is given a steadfast workout, week in and week out, adding another layer of human-made sounds to the busy festive season.

5 March 2013 - Summer

Summer is an ambiguous title, for it is in fact the beginning of Autumn – but one could be easily deceived. The last two weeks we have experienced an extreme heat wave – ten continuous days over 30 degrees. I have never seen the farm and garden so dry. By this time of year we should be experiencing the first autumnal rains that signal the end of summer. Alas the plants are curling up their leaves and turning brown, and shedding them one by one, in an attempt to create their own mulch and retain the minute particles of water that might exist in the soil. In a last minute effort, we have watered and mulched with layers of wet newspaper and pine shavings, hoping that rain is on its way.

Last week an old kangaroo made this place its home. It is not the first time we have seen a kangaroo or wallaby on our property, but it is the first time we have seen a lone ranger so persistent in making this place his new home. He does not appear to be injured, but he does not appear well. His movements are slow, and his condition frail.
1 June 2013 - Winter

As I look out through the dining room window, I see the last leaves from the wisteria flutter to the ground. All that remains now are the skeletons of the trees and gnarled branches of the vines – ornamental grape and wisteria, wrapped tightly around the trellis of the pergola.

The silent blue days of autumnal splendour are now but a faded memory, as the mist spreads across the valley, turning the brightly coloured landscape into shades of grey. I lament the passing of time, the chill of the earth and air. The moisture that seeps into the pores of the house, and the prevailing darkness knocking earlier and earlier every afternoon. The plants and snakes have begun their hibernation. How still and silent the fecund landscape now appears. Even the birds appear quiet as they go about their daily business.

I also lament the passing of the big kangaroo that found refuge at Boonah towards the end of his life. He would stand up to greet us, proud, but damaged, and the little energy he had left was spent lying around or grazing. And then one day he was gone. We found him a few weeks later caught in a fence; it was not a peaceful ending after all.

Smoke fills the valley, the fire bans now lifted, and the dry clear weather perfect for burning. Burning the forest and the bonfires, the piles of branches collected over summer lie waiting. One match and the flames leap and crackle higher and hotter. A celebration of another summer without a bushfire – we sigh in relief, the pyromaniac within smiles and prods the burning embers.
6. Support Material

Catalogue and Journal Essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Dr Sophia Errey</td>
<td>Still Life and Ceramics</td>
<td>Journal Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Dr Irene Barberis</td>
<td>Re-collections</td>
<td>Catalogue Essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Joe Pascoe</td>
<td>Silent Night</td>
<td>Catalogue Essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Dr Ruth Johnstone</td>
<td>Rivers of Slip</td>
<td>Journal Article</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recent work by Sally Cleary has been focused on exploring a genre of considerable interest to contemporary artists, that of still life. Using mixed media she looks again at some traditional practices, while challenging some of the shibboleths of ceramics.

An increased interest in the history and cultural implications of still life painting has occurred from the 1990's on, in parallel with contemporary artist's reconsideration of a genre which, despite its persistent popularity with buyers has always been condemned by critics as materialist and deplorably low in its choice of subject matter. Just such a dismissal by Pliny - nearly 2000 years ago - of a still life theme was alluded to in Cleary's exhibition at e.g.etal under the title “The Unswept Floor” (earlier this year). The exhibition at Stephen McLaughlan Gallery (1 August – 1 September 2007) revealed more fully her current experimentation with issues of theme, material and assemblage in her practice.

Each work consisted of a number of objects, both ceramic and found objects on a base of terracotta, natural stone or bark slab. The small, delicate porcelain forms, chiefly in white, but some coloured were suggestive of bud, flower, pod or leaf forms. While more specific in their allusion to organic forms than biomorphic abstraction they nevertheless remained generic in form. These porcelain forms, unmistakeable as artefacts in their colour and crisp-ness, were deployed informally on the bases with found objects such as twigs, seed vessels, leaves, bark, even a feather, and in one work a fragment of synthetic rope. For the viewer these fragments evoke the rural landscape of Australia, hardly needing the reference to the “Dry Dam” to conjure up fragile yet tough aspects of the environment of “the bush”. Placed together, individually and collectively these objects also remind us of the recurrent cycles of nature and the power of regeneration implicit in forms which suggest flowering and fruiting. Yet a sense of the fleetingness of life, and the ever-present reminders of mortality we often choose to overlook also lurks in these small forms. While the extent of the presence of memento mori or vanitas themes in traditional still life is still debated, this is one of the aspects of the genre which has most captivated the contemporary imagination. The resistance of fired ceramics to perishability has also long symbolized the persistence of human culture, and the poignant trace of the individual hand, visible in these works in the skin ridges imprinted as the clay is modelled.
Like traditional and most contemporary still life, this work encourages us to contemplate the immersion of both the makers and ourselves in a specific culture and a specific landscape. Just as the Dutch artists of the 17th century revealed the economic successes and trade penetration of their time through the display of exotic natural and manmade objects, so these assemblages remind us of the ambivalent relationship of non Indigenous Australians to a harsh yet beautiful environment as they impose forms on the land which can seem futile gestures in the face of its ancient and self-contained power.

While creating sets of vessels or sculptural forms to be presented as a group has ancient roots as well as a more recent history the use of ephemeral materials in mutable arrangements is less usual. It will be interesting to see the development of Sally Cleary’s practice and the evolution of the many potentialities offered by this experimental work.

Dr. Sophia Errey
Senior Lecturer, Art History
School of Art
RMIT University
Catalogue Essay

Re-collections, Project Space, RMIT University, July 2011
Dr. Irene Bareris

“In a world becoming evermore complex with each new geographic and scientific discovery, the ideal cabinet of curiosities constituted an attempt to produce an overall picture of this world, the cosmos. Within its limited space the cabinet of curiosities presented a microcosm, reproducing the general picture, the macrocosm, on a reduced scale.” 1

Our notion of the ‘Wunderkaamer’ - the wonder room, has shifted somewhat from the 18th Century collections of Albertus Seba, but the impulse to collect and to try and ‘see the universe in a tea cup’, is ever present in contemporary busy life.

Sally Cleary finds fascination in all respects in the forests and fields of Boonah, an Australian country coastal region, collecting, sorting and archiving portions and pieces from this unusual southern rainforest. Tiny nests, pieces of wire, twigs, porcelain, twine and myriads of alter paraphernalia are found and delicately positioned into interior contexts – preserving them from natural decay and damage caused by the natural environment.

In this exhibition, a set of wooden boxes have been sourced from a second hand store (all originally from a ceramics factory) and become ‘nests’, containers of the most fragile of natural constructions – the birds nest. “The bird plays an important role in my work as someone/something that is truly at home in the bush. Feathers from parrots and other indigenous birds are interspersed with other found and hand made objects. There is a dead sparrow in one also (obviously not indigenous, but identifiable). The nest is also an obvious metaphor. The found objects, are usually found by me in the landscape - I question their existence (past and present), relationship to the place and materiality. Like me I ask - do they belong here?” 2

This exhibition is layered: it gently forces us to look at location and our relationship to the environment – to where our place of being and the symmetries and balances needed for sustainment are. Where do we belong? Do we become a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ ourselves housed in the microcosm of urban life, or are we relegated to a psychological space of isolation and dislocation? Where is the ‘place’ of intersection and consistency? Cleary poses these questions of transience, vulnerability and location to us.

Her positioning of the ‘nests’ low to the ground, and her representation of the fragments of the forest floor, reminds us of another ‘capturing of time’ in
ceramic, that of the second century Roman mosaic, ‘The Unswept Floor’ ³ where bits and pieces of glass are formed into figurations of the detritus from the after party, or overflows of kitchen preparations. Marc Dion’s work also comes to mind as a presenter of installation based works, filled with environmental and scientific objects; he demands of the viewer to reconsider what has been presented by the institution or governing body, and to stand firm on the principle that it is the artist’s role is to challenge perceptions on all levels. Reiterating this stance and inquiry is crucial, I believe, in the filtering out of dominant and potentially weighted political nodes and understandings. Her positioning of the ‘nests’ low to the ground, and her re-presentation of the fragments of the forest floor, reminds us of another ‘capturing of time’ in ceramic, that of the second century Roman mosaic, ‘The Unswept Floor’ ³ where bits and pieces of glass are formed into figurations of the detritus from the after party, or overflows of kitchen preparations. Marc Dion’s work also comes to mind as a presenter of installation based works, filled with environmental and scientific objects; he demands of the viewer to reconsider what has been presented by the institution or governing body, and to stand firm on the principle that it is the artist’s role is to challenge perceptions on all levels. Reiterating this stance and inquiry is crucial, I believe, in the filtering Cleary in this strong and tactile presentation, seeks to remind us to relook, revalue and gaze on the forgotten, overlooked or even trampled minutiae and residue of the land, and be a participator, and indeed take responsibility for the condition and preservation of our precious environment.

Cleary’s evocative interventions are seen alternatively in the beautifully manipulated and layered photographs. Here land, identity, the exterior and interior are melded into one surreal still of apprehended time. Shadows play across smooth white ceramic surfaces, tensions contract as we notice that the darkened sky is actually the charcoal remains of the burnt forest, and a feather hovers above what seems to be a solid shape but is in fact another layer of atmosphere – here there is poetry, recollections and dreamings.

This installation is a pertinent reminder and redresses the genuine ecological challenge of balancing our interface within each particular environment; for Cleary it’s her actual presence, co existence and ‘being’ in the land at Boonah.

Dr. Irene Bareris
Senior Lecturer, Drawing
School of Art
RMIT University

---

2 Conversation with Sally Cleary, May 2011
3 The Unswept Floor by Heracleitus, ITY, 2nd century AD. Mosaic variant of 2nd BC painting by Soso of Pergamon
Silent Night takes its name from the deathly void of a world turned white by the extinction of animals. The contrast between night and day, black and white, and life and death is played out in this important installation by Sally Cleary.

Silent Night had its antecedence in Silent River, an earlier work that homaged the dying Murray River, exhibited at RMIT Project Space-Spare Room (2011), continuing a 30 year exploration of the artist into nature’s life force.

Essentially performative, the artist will pour a slip of runny clay onto the floor for the opening. In the middle sits an owl, perched on a whitened chair. The work is a warning about the future, a future made vulnerable to the joys of colour if we do not heed nature’s cries for help, symbolised here by the silent owl.

The owl is a symbol of wisdom in English folk stories, though in Australia they are more a sign of hope - their warm presence emitting a comforting individuality. They swoop, commanding their landing spot with their fluffy, usually brown, presence. An owl on a chair combines one of nature’s spirit beings with a representation of domesticated man.

Sally Cleary has long warned of and interpreted the signs of change in the rural landscape. The use of the floor recalls her interest in using a picture plane-like surface on other occasions, upon which a lightly tread narrative is illustrated. Wind, sand, shells, rocks can form part of her vocabulary, which speaks poet-like through the medium of pure clay. The artist’s floor in Silent Night recalls the ancient Greek and Roman mosaic, The Unswept Floor, for its tromp l’oeil detritus of forest leaves and twigs, in lieu of the discarded bones and food scraps of the long gone noble’s feast.
In the Otway Ranges, where the artist lives, sharp divisions exist between naturally verdant parcels of land, and those areas that have been tamed for use by contemporary society. Pass a road, cross a creek and you might be part of a new proposition about beauty. Locating beauty in the post-colonial world can be a post-modern exercise, a conjunction of concepts that often visits the regional artist. Existentialism and intimacy can come together on a star lit night, as one contemplates the greatness and fragility of the environment. It can be a caprice to imagine oneself able to control nature, yet somehow the artist’s voice is a reminder of the responsibility that we all have to navigate this space. Light and sound form part of the installation, with headphones activating the lost sounds of the night.

Works such as Silent Night open up the possibility of philosophical and physical consideration of this inherited duality, as we stand before and as part of the work within the infinity of the gallery’s white walls, in a room which has witnessed so many artistic statements.

Silent Night thus grants us a moment to reflect and understand the unique opportunity that we have in Australia to have the owl and the chair in peaceful repose.

Joe Pascoe
CEO & Artistic Director
Craft
Rivers of Slip: recent projects by Sally Cleary
Dr. Ruth Johnstone

Sally Cleary draws on diverse references for her work, from ancient mosaics to the litter of untidy forest floors, to enact the changing ecology of our landscape. In recent work she responds to the tesserae that carefully illustrate the remnants of dinners passed in the ‘unswept’ mosaic floors of privileged Ancient Greek and Roman households. The articulate tiling of Greek and Roman unswept floors resonates with her floors of slip, particularly as the creamy viscous pools dry and split into flat, crisp platelets, as if arranging themselves in a wall-to-wall interior drought. No living remnant of nature exists in this parched floor.

The historical mosaics mimic shadows made permanent, the grey tiles tracking the leftover debris of a meal and they continue to follow the lively form of attendant rodent scavengers. Modern interpretations of this historical curiosity persist and in this reworking some different shadows are cast. Ideas of vanitas and memento mori commonly emerge out of these newer still life floor renderings. Sally Cleary often refers to the local unswept forest floors of the Otway Ranges and remnants of human habitation as she populates her photographs and collections for exhibition. She extends her most recent interpretations into a form of nature morte of vast proportions, bringing to her work a consciousness of climate change in our anthropocene age. The time-based and ephemeral nature of her recent installations is in counterpoint to the paradoxically permanently unswept mosaic floor. The suspension of clay in water extended across the floor in both her Silent River 2011 and Silent Night 2013 installations, presented respectively at Spare Room and Craft galleries in Melbourne. This unexpected application of casting slip spilling across the floors of the galleries recalls the density of Richard Wilson’s glassy-surfaced tanks of sump oil of the 1980s. Both artists disturb our sense of orientation and remind us to observe how we traverse a gallery space and engage in the materiality of exhibited works, at our own peril. The Silent River floor was augmented by a blue tarpaulin carrying white painted tree branches, the bundle being suspended across the gallery floor as if transiting above the river Styx. The presence of a soundscape, composed by sound artist John Nguyen, added to a sense of loss in this rather still but intractably changing scene. Silent Night featured a white painted chair used as a perch for a stiffly rendered, hand modeled, moulded and slip cast Barking Owl. The bird on its supporting perch began with the opening of the exhibition as if adrift and was the only one to witness the entire transformation of its watery environment to

1 The rather perverse idea of creating an image of an unswept floor was copied by the Romans and was popular into the 5th century AD from the precedent, known to exist as early as the 3rd century BC. Examples survive in the Getty Museum and the Vatican. Interpretations for the intentions behind these renderings of unswept floors range quite widely. Given that the scattered remnants on the floors are of generous proportions and exotic food-stuffs, an overt display of luxury as a sign of status is possible, or perhaps most likely, ritual offerings to dead warriors or ancestors, even reminders to slaves of the household of their never ending cleaning tasks and of their social fate.
its crusty end. This ghostly rendition of a species on the extinct list of animals in forests of Victoria, due to habitat removal, faced a viewing platform and seating for extended audience contemplation in a darkened room with an optional audio soundtrack provided through headphones. Found objects, crafted form and electronic media all intersect with drying slip to make a coherent work.

Through this writing we transition across millennia, bringing still life mosaics to time-based installation art practice. Narrative travels as pools of glassy fluid progressively evaporate, making gaping spaces in between islands of drying clay to become brittle floor tiles attended by spectral witnesses. Landscape is embraced and returned to those domestically scaled Greek and Roman mosaics through the gallery context for Sally Cleary's exhibitions. Through this process, ephemerality and loss elide through the transformative medium of clay to make, in the most eloquent way, a lament over our management of this world.

Ruth Johnstone is an artist currently investigating forest floors and is Senior Lecturer at the School of Art, RMIT University.
7. Curriculum Vitae
CURRICULUM VITAE

Sally Cleary    Mixed media artist
Australian    ceramics . photography . installation . video
www.sallycleary.com

Selected Qualifications:

2007  Commenced PhD, Fine Art, RMIT University, Melbourne
1994  Master of Fine Arts, RMIT Melbourne, specialisation: Wall-based Ceramics
2001  Electronic Design & Multi Media, Victoria University (1 year pt time)
2001  Certificate IV in Small Business Management
2002  Certificate 1V Work place Training and Assessment
1983  Diploma of Visual Art, Canberra School of Art
Major-ceramics; Minors-drawing / photography

Selected Teaching experience:

2012-2014  Senior Lecturer, Object based Practice, RMIT university, Melbourne
2009-2011  Studio Co-ordinator, & Senior Lecturer, Ceramics Studio, RMIT University Melbourne
2010-2013  Offshore teaching program - Ceramics Studio Co-ordinator, Hong Kong School of Art
1992-2009  Lecturer, Ceramics, RMIT University Melbourne
2000-2013  Lecturer, Ceramics, RMIT University - Hong Kong School of Art
2002-09  Lecturer, Adobe Photoshop / Ceramics, Regional Adult Education network (ACFE)
2000  Lecturer, Ceramics, Box Hill Institute of TAFE
1995-96  Lecturer, Ceramics, NMIT Melbourne, Epping Campus

Selected other arts related activities:

2002-2005  Deans Marsh Community Centre, ACFE Adult Education Co-ordinator
2001  Art Studios Co-ordinator, The Wicked Festival, Gasworks Arts Park
1992-2000  Self Employed Tile designer/manufacture, Alchemy Ceramic Design
1990-98  Manager, The Old Bradmill Artist Studios (eight spaces)
1998  Founding Member, Artists and Industry in Maribyrnong (AIM)
1996-98  Co-organiser, Maribyrnong Artist Project (MAP), local festival
1992  Artist in Schools Program, Coburg Islamic College, Melbourne
1990  Artist in Residence, Caulfield Grammar School, Wheelers Hill, Melbourne
1989  Artist in Schools Program, Star of the Sea College, Gardenvale, Melbourne
1986-87  Resident, The Meat Market Craft Centre, Melbourne
Solo Exhibitions:

2014   Silent Life, solo exhibition, Geelong Regional Gallery, Art Installation with soundscape
2013   Silent Night, solo exhibition, Craft Victoria, Art Installation with Soundscape
2011   Re-collections / Silent River, solo exhibition, Project Space & Spare Room, RMIT University
2008   Mimesis, solo exhibition, Red Gallery-Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne
2007   Land and Identity, solo exhibition, Stephen McLaughlan Gallery, Melbourne
2007   The Unswept Floor, solo exhibition, e.g.etal, Melbourne
1995   Sally Cleary, Solo Exhibition, Craft Victoria

Group Exhibitions:

1983-2014   Over 30 group exhibitions including:
2013   Contemporary Australian Drawing 3: Reading the Space, New York Studio School, NY
2012   AT_Salon Inaugural Exhibition, Anita Traverso Gallery, Richmond, Melbourne
2012   Contemporary Drawing 2: Drawing as notation, text and discovery, The Drawing Room, London; and Langford 120, Melbourne. Curated by Irened Barberis
2011-13   Tooth & Nail, Cross Cultural Ceramics travelling exhibition, Australia and Asia, Curated by Stephen Gallagher, supported by NETS
2010   Analogy: colour, tone & tint, curated group exhibition, The Drawing Room, Melbourne
2009   The Nature of Things, self-curated mentored group exhibition: Cleary, Nucci, MacBryde, First Site Gallery, RMIT Link Arts
2009   Perspective, curated group exhibition, Craft Victoria
2009   Ergon Energy Art Award, curated ceramic award, Rock Hampton Art Gallery.
2009   Manningham Ceramic Award, curated award, Manningham Art Gallery.
2007   Notions of Still Life and Landscape, Sally Cleary & Victoria Howlett, RMIT School of Art Gallery, Melbourne
2005   Innovations, School of Art Gallery, RMIT University
2005   Light Matters, Skepsi Art Gallery, Carlton
2000   Australian Contemporary Ceramics, Fringe Club, Hong Kong
1998   RMIT Fine Art at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Wan Chai, Hong Kong

Selected Large Commissions:

1986-1999   Over 10 public and private architectural commissions including:
1996   War Memorial Mural, Altona RSL, Rosenthal Munekton and Shields Architects
1996   Tribal Archways, Shepherds Bridge Cycle tunnel, Footscray, Maribyrnong Council
1995  Earth, Fire, Air and Water, Figurative Columns. YWCA Melbourne, Millar Robertson Architects
1988  Horizon, Large Wall Mural, Belconnen Library, Canberra. Bicentennial Commission

Selected Articles:
2013  Joe Pascoe, Silent Night, catalogue essay, Craft Victoria
2011  Irene Barberis, Re-collections, catalogue essay, RMIT Project Space and Spare Room
1999  Christopher Sanders, Sally Cleary: Commission Work, Ceramic Art and Perception, Jly/34
1998  Denise Ryan, Artist’s in Residence, The Age Newspaper, Domain Magazine, 29/7/98
1988-99  Various other articles

Selected Publications and Conference Papers:

Research and Grants:
2014  Arts Victoria: Art Development Grant, for ‘Silent Life’, Geelong Gallery
2014  Research - PhD: Travel – France, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom.
2012  Research - PhD: Travel – Netherlands, Germany, Italy, France and United Kingdom. Assisted by RMIT University, School of Art-Staff Development Funding
2012  Australian Ceramics Association: Development Grant for Conference paper, ACT 2012 (Australian Ceramics Trienalle)
2007-14  Research - PhD ‘The Nature of Things: Contemporary Still Life’, (PhD title and investigation)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Research - Architectural Ceramics: Travel - Britain, France, Holland, Portugal and Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Australia Council: Grant to attend Millennium Ceramic Conference, Amsterdam in 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Australia Council: Development Grant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. Attached catalogues and digital files

8.1 USB Memory Stick ADR - Catalogue of artworks: 2007-2014
8.2 Journal of Australian Ceramics
8.3 Re-collections Catalogue
8.4 Journal of Australian Ceramics
8.5 Tooth and Nail Catalogue
Dedication

This PhD is dedicated to

my parents

Dr John Cleary 26 April 1929- 25 December 1981
Ruth Cleary 18 March 1933 - 6 November 2008

and

my ‘faithful hound’

Jasper, 2000-2014