

A photograph of a makeshift structure, possibly a tent or shelter, made of a green tarp and a rusted metal pole. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an outdoor setting at night or in low light. The text "DROWNING NOT WAVING" is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the image.

**DROWNING
NOT WAVING**



*'What you thought were your glory days
Seem to have come undone'*
- James Reyne

*'I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning'*
- Stevie Smith

Image (Cover) : Jill Orr - *Detritus Springs - Planting Future*
(Photographer: Christina Simons for Jill Orr)

Image (Left) : Penelope Davis - *Future Archaeologies*
(detail - Photo by Simon Strong)

DROWNING NOT WAVING

22 AUG - 06 OCT 2019

James Reyne's 1998 song and Stevie Smith's 1957 poem Not Waving, Drowning refer to issues of the heart, and in this exhibition Wyndham Art Gallery applies the same famous phrase reversed, to issues of the earth. Taking a global perspective this extraordinary exhibition looks at climate change in the 21st century. It asks, what were we thinking when we kept plundering the Earth with little thought for the future and how did we not react to the warnings sooner.

Artists Jill Orr, Yasbelle Kerkow, Penelope Davis, Clinton Naina, Florence Folole Tupuola, Baz Alokaka, Ella Benore Rowe, Peter Lemalu, and Paul Handley.

Wyndham City acknowledges the peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land on which Wyndham Art Gallery stands and we pay our respects to their elders, past, present and future.

Wyndham Art Gallery
Great Art. Deep West.

DROWNING NOT WAVING

Curator's Note by
Dr Megan Evans

Can art make a difference to the plight of the rapidly warming planet?

A 2008 exhibition at RMIT Gallery titled *Heat: Art and Climate Change* included prominent Australian and international artists and looked at how contemporary international art practice is responding to climate change.

Jill Orr presented a stunning work in the exhibition, *Southern Cross – to bear and behold* which documented a performance with elements of fire and ice. That same exhibition included two stuffed polar bears; one in a crate and one towering over the gallery visitors in a powerful but poignant stance. Cameron Robbins showed a fake tornado in a phone box like structure that you could interact with. Those images were striking.

Eleven years later the urgency of climate change is ramping up. Each day we hear new dire warnings, from the dangerous decline of insects to the images that flood social media of polar bears that had been so intimidating in the past, but are now in such tragic circumstances with fur stained brown by the crumbling landscape.

CLIMARTE, Arts for a Safe Climate, is a Melbourne based organisation dedicated to gathering an alliance of artists, organisations and academics to advocate for action, but not just action, creative action.

Clearly arts can make a difference, whether by proposing new ways of living with the changing climate or working to alert the world through visual mediums on the reality of climate change.

Image: Paul Handley - *Lantern* (detail)

Many more artists could have been included in this exhibition, which is a testament to the concern that exists in the community. Jill Orr has made work about the environment for decades and Penelope Davis whose piece *Future Archaeologies* was in Sydney Contemporary last year. The brand-new collective of Pasifika artists, are a group who reject the position of being victims to large fossil fuel producing nations, proclaiming *WE ARE NOT DROWNING WE ARE FIGHTING*. Artists whose heritage is from the Pacific Islands have a direct and confronting experience of the impact of climate change.

Yasbelle Kerkow makes work called *Cyclone Food Series* which are small sculptures made using tinned corned beef; the only food to survive a cyclone. They operate almost like hopeful tokens to the gods. Ella Benore Rowe and Baz Alokaka, both from Papua New Guinea, assert the complexity and richness of their cultures before the dimdims/Europeans/ Missionaries came. I can't help but applaud the title given to so called 'civilising cultures' the 'dimdims', who are so clearly to blame for the catastrophic consequences of modern living that we are all now being affected by. Peter Lemalu and Florence Folole Tupuola from Samoa both make work about family connections and tradition, reflecting on the fight to retain their land in the face of encroaching tides.

Torres Strait Islander artist Clinton Naina follows a tradition in his work that critiques white washing. Turning his attention to the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, he identifies with this erosion of colour over time with his work *I Am The Reef*. Paul Handley draws our attention to the mass migration coming our way with the rising of the sea levels in his work *Lantern* made from hundreds of children's life jackets.

This exhibition is an urgent outcry from artists based in the South Pacific who feel the imperative to speak about climate change through their work. As you look through the exhibition, we invite you to reflect on how humans impact and are impacted by the climate change reality we find ourselves facing.



Drowning Not Waving

by Dr Léuli Eshrāghi

I've been obsessed with science fiction novels, films and television series since the mid-1990s weekly broadcasts of Babylon 5 on Sāmoan television. Fantastical worlds have become reality. Dreaming and realising artworks that express how Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are concerned with, catastrophised by, and yet hopeful whilst despairing of surviving beyond climate apocalypse has become a necessary life-affirming gesture. In a time of rapid flows of mis/information, capital, goods, people and ideas for those with privilege, and the containment and erasure of those without, focusing our attention on artists whose urgent work brings about what Beatrice Glow calls an "environmentally and racially just future" is imperative.

Meriam-Mir/Ku-Ku artist Clinton Naina, known for his politically bold paintings commenting on colonial impacts in the Zenadh-Kes/Torres Strait, as well as strong performances earlier in his career, presents the literal visual effects of bleaching on canvas, velvet and other surfaces. Critical of the degradation of the seemingly forsaken Great Barrier Reef, Naina uses plastic bleach bottles to show us that containment of Indigenous lifeways already means that the devastation and destruction of prior self-sustaining oceanic worlds is on our watch and on our hands.

Image: Florence Folole Tupuola - *Olo mu'u* (detail)

Wadubo artist Ella Benore Rowe presents a new body of photographs and a video invested in depicting the ceremonial role of the tawara headdress from her ancestral village in Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea, through photographs where family members pose close to the camera with ease as fellow clan members, young and old generations are adorned with tawara fashioned in bright colours with bird feathers, tree kangaroo fur and bush string. These portraits authored from within Wadubo culture, work as witnesses to cultural continuity despite the German, Dutch and Australian colonial administrations of New Guinea's numerous First Nations.

Remaking and repurposing contemporary society's discarded plastics lies at the centre of settler artist Emma Davies' practice. Objects commonly considered ugly and useless undergo a process of stretching whereby their purpose when they were gleaned shifts entirely. Domestic and industrial uses for processed single-use plastics now depict haunting and beautiful birdlife – extinct and veering on the edge of sustainable populations, due to human arrogance in pesticide use and habitat destruction. *Poly-nate* (2015) is an installation

Image: Emma Davies - *Pelts*





composed of salvaged materiality, where plastic mesh netting and cords now embody birds, fronds and branches together haunting consumerist excess.

Sāmoan artist Florence Folole Tupuola considers the potential for *survivance*, that is Gerald Vizenor's concept of survival and resistance, in her past performance and illustration work. Facing a dense ink forest of entangled forms on paper, Florence dips fabric in water in the ceremonial tānoa bowl, seated on a pandanus woven mat, seeking guidance out of today's climate impasse. In facing the illustration, Florence defers to ancestral wisdom, embodying the lonely branch of the family remaining of the many who would all be seated at posts in a faletele meeting house, which are rarely constructed today.

Baz Alokaka's densely etched work depicts the ubiquitous bird of paradise taking pride of place in an idyllic New Guinea scene where the motifs of his name people's aesthetic traditions in carving and ceremonial painting swirl from the skies to the waters and lands. The bird of paradise's beak curves around the setting sun, warning us about the eclipse of consumerist lifestyles but also seducing the viewer into caring for fragile yet resilient ecosystems across New Guinea and the wider Great Ocean contexts.

Image (left) : Peter Lemalu - *Coconut*

Image (right) : Ella Benore Rowe - *Tawara*





In settler artist Jill Orr's compelling work *Detritus Springs* (2018), a live performance documented by Christina Simons, and a video collaboration with Ben Mangan, Dave McKinnar and Luke Keys, we see a dreamy post-apocalyptic industrial world. Jill's bellowing coat-clad figure moves through wafts of smoke, face concealed, into concrete and wood rooms and overgrown courtyards from a bygone civilisation. A homage to the tenacity of plant life in urban environments, this work questions humanity's capacity to survive, from an age of relative abundance prior to the last few centuries, and on to an age of extenuated debts and insurmountable deficits of imagining a world together.

Future Archaeologies (2017), an installation of numerous jellyfish suspended in the gallery, is settler artist Penelope Davis' most recent exploration of documentation for forms of life that may pre-date but not post-date human impact through the Capitalocene. Silicone, nylon thread and reused single-use plastic come together in delicately hand-sewn jellyfish figures that carry the cast memory of leaves and seaweed, before themselves being integrated into the installation. This work entreats us to seek once more a symbiotic balance with non-human kin animals and wider ecosystems, of course necessary to a shared existence on this planet.

Image (Left) : Emma Davies - *Pelts* (detail)

Image (Right) : Ella Benore Rowe - *Tawara*



Embossed text in calligraphic font set into thin plywood sheets, *Coconut* (2019) is a new work by Sāmoan artist Peter Lemalu. Commonly known within Indigenous communities of the Great Ocean as an insult to someone who is seen to have sold out to integrate into Eurocentric society, this work can be interpreted through multiple cultural signs. Are these wooden sheets remnants of a colour palette, fruit texture, superfood and sustainable sourcing of natural fibres for construction and clothing? Is this a colour bar from a future paint store once the hundreds of coconut varieties on Earth have suffered severe global heating?

Yasbelle Kerkow, iTaukei Viti artist, offers a hauntingly colourful installation, *Cyclone Food* (2018), composed of corned beef cans, yarn, shells and fresh bird of paradise flowers. These are commonly understood symbols of island cultural and culinary practice. Known especially for her community organising work through local collective New Wayfinders, Yasbelle's work questions what place currently prized foods like corned beef have in communities' diets. The work combines previously sustainable foods like fish with the imported processed corned beef, itself causing numerous protracted health issues, to raise questions of ocean health in this time of overfishing, bordered lagoons, nuclear fallout, coupled with a newer high frequency of major cyclones and environmental disasters.

The Great Ocean and all its shores have always been a highway of peoples, birds, mammals, ideas, ceremonies, but now we are faced with the greatest existential threat of climate apocalypse. This disproportionately impacts Indigenous peoples whose lifeways have not created the global heating produced by industrialised countries. *Waterworld* was another film depicting a fluid expanse that played in the cinemas in Sāmoa as a child, but I'm not convinced that scrap metal floating wreckyard pirate villages are our only option, considering the importance of Indigenous knowledges that centre on symbiotic relationships with non-human kin that can still support existence. It does require us to deeply transform our ways of being in the world from peoples enjoying the glory days of the decadent city, to re/become relations sharing this planet together.

Image : Jill Orr - *Detritus Springs - The Good Earth* (Photographer Christina Simons for Jill Orr)





Climate Change

by Dr Matt McArthur

Three decades of crushing disappointment.

It's three decades since I first read articles in the scientific literature about climate change. I'm sure I could trace scientific concern about the changes our industries and farming practices made to the atmosphere back further than that but that's when the issue first came on my radar - at around age fifteen, reading the literature my dad brought home from his job at CSIRO.

At the time concern focused on a potential problem for future generations but each year since then more and more papers recounting the predicted outcomes turned up in that literature. Scientists alerted to look for climate change found the evidence. Looking at historical images of Antarctic mountains and penguin rookeries I can see changes over the last century as glaciers recede and species' distributions change in response to rising sea surface temperatures but I don't have to look that far

Image: Penelope Davis - *Future Archaeologies* (installation view)



afield to see climate change has been our present for several decades, not the future of our descendants. A golf course closes as fifty year flooding events become five year flooding events. Fire fighters plan around dramatic decreases in return times for catastrophic bush fires. The East Australian current extends further south year by year and marine species unseen in our waters before are turning up in concert with that shift. It's not hypothetical. A changing climate is our reality.

So what happened? Why didn't the articles published thirty years ago convince more people that climate change poses a real threat to our collective well-being? Why has it taken so long to get people to recognise the problem we face?

The scientific approach to finding answers that go beyond guesses and estimates has a demonstrated track record of getting results that no other branch of human activity can boast. Art didn't eradicate small pox. Philosophy didn't propel people to the moon.

Image (left) : Baz Alokaka - *Untitled*

Image (right) : Yasbelle Kerkow - *Cyclone Food Series*





Religion is demonstrably bad at birth control. The tool box science gives humanity can provide us with solutions to practical problems. It once held a lot of respect because it increased agricultural outputs, took us across oceans with increasing speed and comfort, and brought an end to the deaths, injuries and iron lungs associated with polio epidemics. I'm not sure when it lost that respect. I haven't measured and tested what made people turn a blind eye to the accumulating evidence that our climate was changing, let alone that our actions are the cause. I have some ideas that would inform any study I started to examine that matter based on discussions I've had about climate change over three decades. If valid, those ideas could hold some explanatory power, so I'll couch my thoughts about our slow response to a big problem in terms of those discussions.

Many people initially claimed that humanity was too small to effect significant change on something as big as the atmosphere. There are two misconceptions at play in this stance. The first is that the atmosphere is big. It's not. It's a thin smear of gas on the big ball of rock it surrounds. This is where a scientific approach is so valuable. It removes your personal experience, perceptions and cultural biases from a situation and deals with what's actually going on. People think the atmosphere is big because we

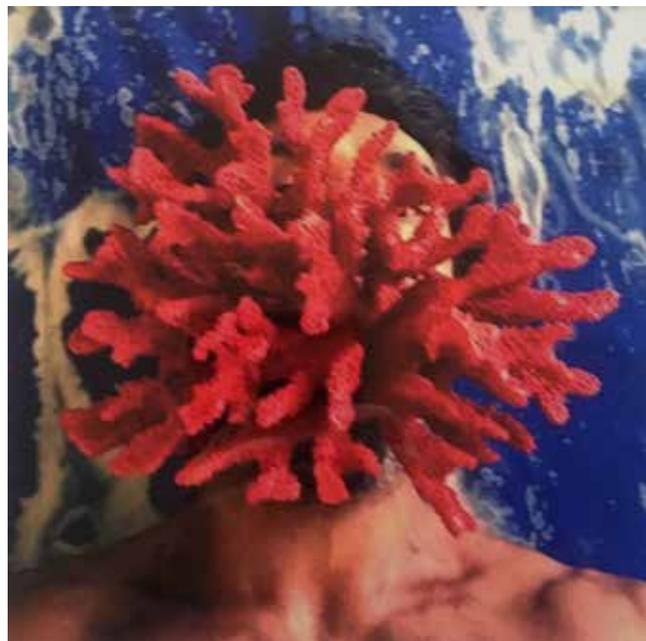
Image : Peter Lemalu - *Coconut* (installation view)

can't reach the top of it, even on tippy toes, but it's only a hundred kilometres thick and all the interesting stuff happens in the first ten kilometres, where it's most dense and where we live. That's not big if you think of how far we travel to work, to see loved ones, and to go on holiday. The second is that humanity is small. We're not. We're more numerous than any other large animal, we live on every continent and large numbers of us starve at an alarming frequency because we use arable land in ways that put our population beyond what the Earth can reliably sustain. We send species extinct accidentally just in trying to sustain ourselves. In the nineteenth century men in wooden ships powered by sails nearly sent fur seals extinct for fashion's sake. We are a big species with big environmental impacts even if we're not trying.

People also regularly mixed up climate change and the hole in the ozone layer, which received similar attention in the scientific literature at around the same time I started seeing articles about greenhouse gasses. Both problems arise from human activities



Image : Yasbelle Kerkow - *Cyclone Food Series*



Images : Clinton Naina - I Am The Reef

impacting our atmosphere but where climate change results from our energy production, industrial processes, farming practices and forestry back to the mid eighteenth century, the hole in the ozone layer was caused by a small number of chemicals invented and applied in the twentieth century. After recognising the problem, identifying the cause and finding alternatives, we stopped making the hole in the ozone layer worse. Slowing our production of greenhouse gasses is a much bigger problem because we inherited very carbon heavy boots from previous generations. Almost every aspect of our lifestyle relies on large applications of fossil fuels, industrial processes and intensive farming so disentangling ourselves from the

causes of climate change is a far bigger deal than changing what gasses go into our refrigerators. Even people who profess flexibility and open mindedness resist substantial changes imposed on their lives by outside influences, so there was a big mental incentive to resist the idea that the climate was changing at all. For a long time any evidence scientists pointed to was written off as noise in the data. People with a financial incentive to maintain things as they are applied the methods used by the tobacco industry to sow doubt about study results and politicians and industries ran with that rhetoric. A lot of people did. Things changed when the sheer volume showing the climate is changing became impossible to ignore. Doubt



didn't serve as a means to stick fingers in ears anymore, so the rhetoric shifted to identifying the cause. *Correlation isn't causation*, a central tenet of scientific investigation, became a catch cry of former climate change deniers. No longer able to deny the climate is changing they began denying the changes are anything to do with humanity.

Science doesn't deal in absolute certainty but probabilities and likelihoods. There's always scope to deny a given cause and effect are linked but the cost of getting our ideas about climate change wrong are millions of people dying in floods and droughts we cause because we're too dim-witted or too selfish to try to prevent them. We don't need certainty to be concerned, only a non-zero likelihood.

Climate change is our present. If you don't believe me I encourage you to speak to a property insurance industry statistician. They're taking climate change effects on sea levels deadly seriously because they make their money accurately understanding the probabilities some climate change deniers have made a living deliberately misinterpreting. It's not just scientists making noise about this, anymore. It's fire-fighters and golf course boards of directors and insurance agents and people whose nations are slipping beneath the waves.

Image : Jill Orr - *Detritus Springs - Present* (Photographer: Christina Simons for Jill Orr)

Go Deeper:

Conversations, workshops and activities that offer a deeper insight into the exhibition and the creative practice of exhibiting artists.



Artist In Conversation

A conversation that provokes and inspires with exhibiting artists who are making work that highlights the challenging environmental future we face.

Join Jill Orr, Florence Folole Tupuola, Yasbelle Kerkow and Penelope Davis at Wyndham Art Gallery for an in-depth talk about making artwork that's ecologically aware.

WED 11 SEP 2019
6:00pm - 8:00pm

Image: Paul Handley - Lantern

Sunday Salon

Join us in a wood carving session, facilitated by New Wayfinders and Pacific Climate Warriors, as they share stories and highlight the realities of climate change and some of the work being done on the frontlines as resistance, as they share the spirit “we are not drowning, we are fighting”.

Light snacks will be provided, children are welcome and bookings are essential, \$10.

SUN 29 SEP
12:00pm - 5:00pm

wyndhamarts.eventbrite.com



Environmental Open Day

Feeling inspired after viewing the DROWNING NOT WAVING exhibition?

Why not join a local community group?

Visit the Gallery on the last day of the exhibition and meet people from a variety of environmentally minded community groups. They are eager to talk about their projects and activities - it's a perfect opportunity to learn what's out there and how you can join!

SUN 06 OCT
11:00am - 3:00pm

Image: Florence Folole Tupuola - Olo mu'u



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