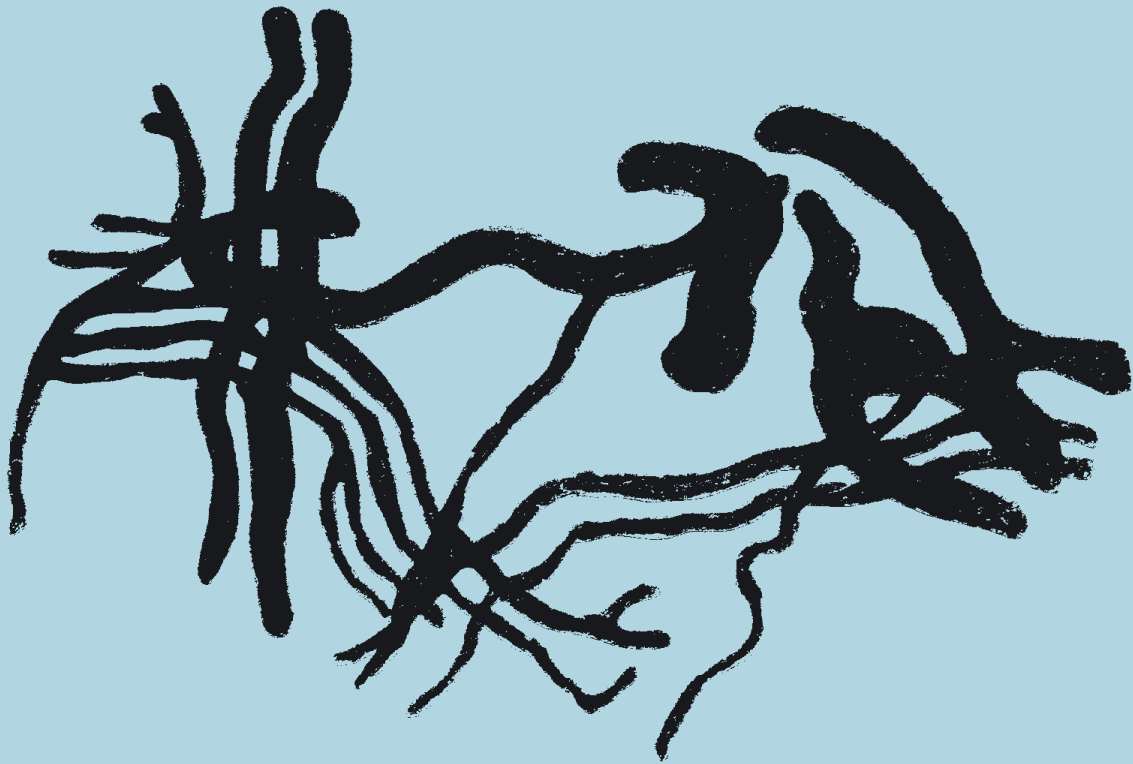


ACTIONS *for Water* II

20 August to 8 November 2026

La Trobe Art Institute



ARTISTS:

underFOOT Collective (AU), Tomoko Hayashi (JPN), Eugenia Lim with Maddi Mansfield and Bec Phillips (AU), Mei Swan Lim (AU), Daniel Jan Martin (AU), Zarina Muhammad (SG), Glenda Nicholls (AU), Khvay Samnang (KH), Sao Sreymao (KH), Urbonas Studio (USA-MIT/LITH)

CURATED BY:

Sharmila Wood and Amelia Wallin

WHERE THE WATER LEADS US

Amelia Wallin

For Sharmila Wood and I, collaborating from opposite sides of the island-continent known as Australia, what better way to trace our connection to this watery research than through the currents, streams and bodies of water that surround us, and eventually flow into the same shared ocean? Tracing the water around and between us is also a way of tracing the politics of our locations, from the eastern and western sides of Australia and the different positions we are flowing from and through.

From where I grew up in Sydney on Gadigal Country, I could glimpse water from the bottom of the road: a curve of harbour bay, sectioned off by sandstone blocks that created an artificial boundary between land and sea. This neat divide paved over the ambiguous intertidal zone occurring naturally between ocean and land. From my current home in regional Victoria, both sandstone and the ocean are rare sights. The largest body of water is a former reservoir turned popular swimming spot. Known as Expedition Pass Reservoir, or “the res”, it is shared by locals—people, along with ducks, dragonflies, coots and frogs—and out-of-towners. Closer still is Forest Creek, a tributary of the Campaspe River. Undulating across hills and scrub, Forest Creek does not have a permanent flow of water year-round. During drier periods, it exists as a chain of deep ponds, which grow and recede with the seasons. In Wanyarra season (July to August), temporary and ephemeral bodies of water appear from the ground. Refusing permanence, they disappear again in the heat of Barramal (Emu) and Milakuk (Lightning) time. A sign I pass daily reminds me that this creek was once the world’s largest alluvial goldfield, as though the landscape itself did not carry reminder enough: the coppiced regrowth, the crevices, the piles of emptied dirt from which the Dja Dja Wurrung named “upside-down country.”

Before colonisers discovered gold in the region, Bendigo was sustained by a chain of ponds. Dja Dja Wurrung oral traditions and knowledge, alongside early settler records, describe a healthy series of interconnected waterholes surrounded by wooded areas and open flats. This chain of ponds is what might be described as a *wetlandscape*. Ana Lara Heyns, Carolyn Briggs, Brian Martin, Maria de Lourdes Melo Zurita, Laura Harper and Catherine Murphy coined the term to describe the interconnected networks of wetlands and their surrounding environments that are becoming increasingly scarce through urbanisation and the expansion of built infrastructure. The authors argue that these wetlandscapes offer generative possibilities: “they reveal how water continues to move beneath and through urban infra-structures, remembering older hydrological patterns despite attempts to suppress, control and categorise them.”¹ The intermediary zone of the wetlandscape confounds the binaries of colonial thought. Like the sandstone wall near my childhood home, colonial infrastructure insists

on either land or water, allowing nothing in between, the wetlandscape, however, insists on permeability.

To this day, the colonial project seeks to engineer, drain, divert, control, regulate and commodify water as an economic resource.

In Bendigo, that project was almost successful. The chain of ponds was reduced to a subterranean bluestone drain running through the city, periodically releasing disturbed minerals and sulphureous smells. Since colonisation, the area has become increasingly prone to flooding, with stormwater, sediment and pollutants washing into Yaram Yaram Manya (Bendigo Creek).

And yet, follow the Yaram Yaram Manya downstream and encounter an entirely different experience. The Djaara Gatjin team has been working to reverse this damage, restoring the waterway to a chain of ponds. The project’s Traditional Owner name is Yaram Yaram Bayikina, meaning “Bendigo Creek—reawakening it.”² On a warm spring day, Djaara Elders and Traditional Owners guided a group of La Trobe Art Institute staff and artists to Wanyarra Dum (the Frog Ponds). We learn about this important cultural place and how part of its healing has involved Djaara-led restoration of this chain of connected freshwater ponds, creating habitat for frogs, birds and other species.

The reawakened creek is now a site for gathering, reflection and education. As the ponds fill with fresh water during periods of high flow and flooding, they replenish the aquatic ecosystems they support.³ This is where the water leads us: towards a reawakening, and a recognition that the boundaries we have imposed between land and water, city and creek, are neither natural nor permanent.

Actions for Water was first presented at Tin Sheds Gallery in Sydney in 2025. What does it mean for an exhibition to flow from site to site, collecting, expanding, shedding, renewing as it flows? For Sharmila and I, it has meant undertaking Djaara consultations side by side with artists and inviting new contributions that speak to the specificity of this place. Artworks which were presented in the first iteration of the exhibition expand or change, in response to the site and context of La Trobe Art Institute and its possibilities.

Sharmila Wood

I live above Galup on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja in Western Australia. From my house, the land slopes towards the wetland below, a place layered with histories that exceed the suburban streets and houses surrounding it. In 2025, following a sustained community campaign, the Town of Cambridge officially restored the name Galup to the wetland known since 1831 as Lake Monger. The decision recognised the efforts of senior Whadjuk Noongar people and initiatives such as artist Poppy van Oorde-Grainger’s Same Drum’s Galup Arts Project that foreground truth telling and the restoration of this cultural landscape’s traditional ecological knowledge long excluded from public memory.

Galup or “place where the home fires burn,” forms part of an ancient chain of wetlands connected through groundwater systems that once stretched across the Swan Coastal Plain.⁴ Known variously as the Perth Wetlands, the Great Lakes District, or the Perth Great Lakes, these waters shaped the ecology and cultural life of the region for thousands of years. Seasons move through the wetland in cycles of abundance and retreat. Birds arrive and depart. Water levels rise and fall.

More than a geographical feature, Galup is constituted through relationships between people, water, the more-than-human world, and Country. The arrival of the Swan River Colony in 1829 profoundly disrupted these relationships. In May 1830, less than a year after British settlement, Galup became the site of one of the earliest documented colonial massacres in Western Australia.⁵

For much of the state’s history, these events remained largely absent from public memory.

Instead, Galup became known through narratives of recreation and urban development. Wetlands were dredged and reshaped into a lake reminiscent of English parks. Bathing sheds, rowing clubs, sailing regattas, and pleasure boats transformed the shoreline. Archival photographs reveal expansive open water framed by a growing city. Numerous drownings were also recorded here, and the echoes of those losses still haunt the site.

Yet, in a city built through the filling, draining, and forgetting of wetlands, Galup persists as a reminder that water remembers what cities often overlook. Revered by Whadjuk Noongar people as the home of the Waugal, the wetland carries traces of ancient groundwater systems alongside contemporary acts of restoration and care. Past assumptions that wetlands were unproductive swamps have given way to an understanding of their ecological and cultural significance. Wetlands cool cities through evapotranspiration, support biodiversity, filter water, and sustain cultural memory.

Professor Anne Poelina describes water not as a resource but as a living ancestor—a River of Life with rights and responsibilities under First Law.⁶ Water is kin, and wellbeing emerges through reciprocal relationships with Country. These ideas resonate deeply with my own family. My son carries the Ngarluma place name Morumburri, inherited through his paternal grandmother’s family: a place of permanent water in the Pilbara, where water remains when other waters disappear. My daughter is named for Yarraliny, the Pilbara water lily. Their names continue a Ngarluma practice of calling for Country, reminding us that we enter the world already held within relationships that precede us.

Social theorist, philosopher and author Minna Salami’s idea of sensuous knowledge offers another way of describing this experience.⁷ To know water is not simply to measure or map, but to walk beside it, observe seasonal rhythms, remember stories, and attend to the relationships gathered around water. *Actions for Water* emerged from a desire to think with water rather than simply about it.

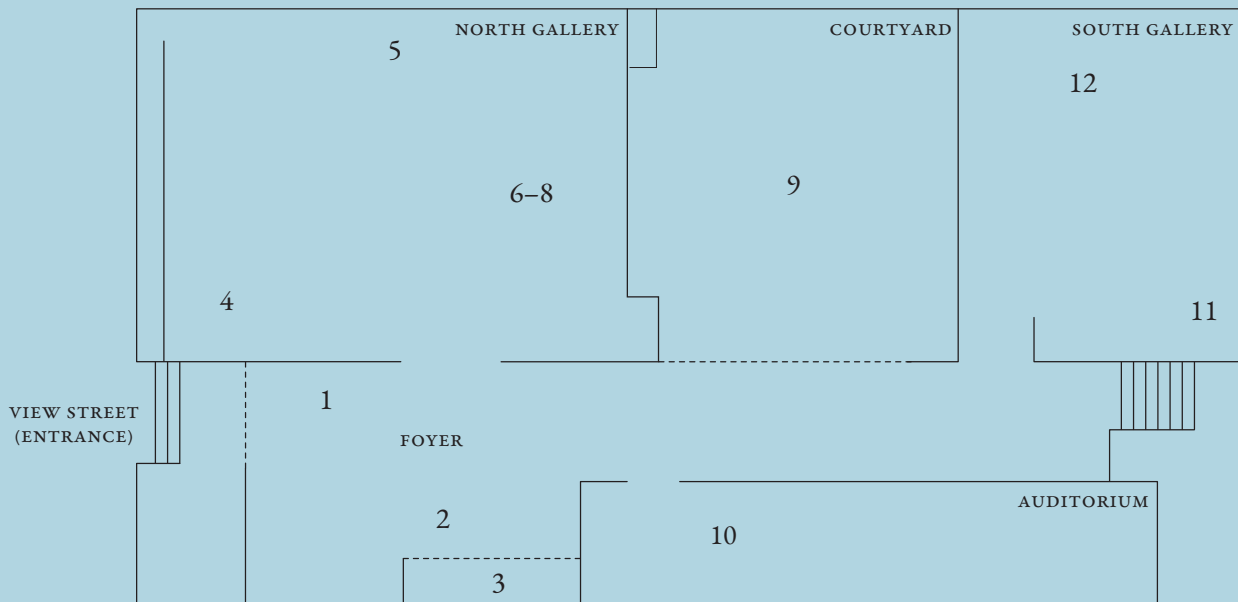
Through field research, deep listening, community collaboration, and site-responsive methodologies, the artists in the exhibition approach water as both subject and method. Rather than representing water as an object, participating artists trace the visible and invisible systems through which aquatic environments are continually produced and transformed.

At Galup I am reminded that water exceeds every boundary we attempt to impose upon it. Beneath the city, aquifers continue to flow. Birds follow ancient pathways. Stories surface across generations. Galup asks us to attend not to the immediate or the obvious, but to endurance, complexity, and deep time. Galup’s waters hold stories of abundance and loss, violence and survival, forgetting and remembrance. It cannot be understood through a single narrative; its histories flow through one another. Wetlands, aquifers, birds, seeds, and seasonal flows recognise none of the boundaries we impose upon them. They exist instead as fields of relationship.

The title *Actions for Water* emerged from a question that continues to shape my thinking: can form create impact? Can artistic and curatorial practice contribute to ecological action? The proposition was never that art alone solves environmental crises, but that action begins with perception. Before systems change, ways of seeing must change. This approach also finds resonance in Buckminster Fuller’s systems thinking.⁸ Fuller argued that nothing exists in isolation; every element participates within larger systems whose relationships matter more than the individual parts themselves. Thinking with water therefore means attending to flows rather than boundaries, relationships rather than categories, and exchange rather than separation. This understanding has also shaped the evolution of *Actions for Water* as a relational system—with Amelia Wallin at La Trobe Art Institute the exhibition gathers new conversations, contexts and communities as it moves. Each iteration responds to the waters, histories and knowledge of its location, recognising that meaning emerges through connection.

1. Ana Lara Heyns, Carolyn Briggs, Brian Martin, Maria de Lourdes Melo Zurita, Laura Harper & Catherine Murphy (03 Feb 2026): (Un)regulated wetlandscapes – laang tageek baany in Boonwurrung Country, Nairm, Settler Colonial Studies, DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2026.2619308.
2. City of Greater Bendigo 2020, *Reimagining Bendigo Creek, City of Greater Bendigo*, accessed 18 August 2026, <https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/City-Greater-Bendigo-Reimagining-Bendigo-Creek.pdf>.
3. Lee, K., Lamont, A., Whiteford, C., van Eeden, L. & Hames, F. 2024, The Nature and Community-led Approach to Disaster Resilience: Story Library, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Heidelberg, Victoria, accessed 18 August 2026, https://www.ari.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/723009/Nature-led-Community-Resilience-Story-Library.pdf.
4. Landgate 2025, *Renaming of Lake Monger to Traditional Noongar Name ‘Galup’*, Western Australian Government, accessed July 30th 2026 <<https://www.wa.gov.au/>>
5. Galup, *City of Vincent*, accessed July 30th 2026 <<https://library.vincent.wa.gov.au/local-history-centre/projects/galup>>
6. Martuwarra River Of Life, Poelina, A., Bagnathell, D., & Lim, M. (2020). (2020). *Recognizing the Martuwarra’s First Law Right to Life as a Living Ancestral Being. Transnational Environmental Law*. 9. 541-568. 10.1017/S2047102520000163.
7. Salami, M. (2020). *Sensuous knowledge: A Black feminist approach for everyone*. Zed Books.
8. Fuller, R. Buckminster. (1969). *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

LIST OF WORKS



1. Glenda Nicholls
The Reflection Net
Jute, cotton and feathers
The University of Melbourne Art Collection, purchased 2024
Dimensions variable
2. Eugenia Lim with Maddi Mansfield and Bec Phillips
PIPES (gatjin), 2026
Copper pipes and fittings, granite charcoal and sand collected from Djaara country following the cultural advice of Bec Phillips
Dimensions variable
3. Mei Swan Lim (Mei Saraswati)
Insect Opera, 2023
Sound composition and window painting
Featuring field recordings including Tropical House Cricket in garage (Wanneroo, Western Australia); stream near Baha'i temple (Tiapapata, Samoa); Bush Cricket, Clicking Froglet, Motorbike Frog, Western Banjo Frog (aka Pobblebonk) (Baigup Wetlands, Maylands, Western Australia); Water Boatmen (Beeliar Wetlands, Beeliar, Western Australia); sea lapping on rocks at Wadjemup (aka Rottnest Island, Western Australia); Honeyeater, Crow and Wattlebird (Derbal Yerrigan, aka Swan River, Maylands, Western Australia); European Honeybee (Wanneroo, Western Australia).
19 minutes
4. Zarina Muhammad
Follow the Movement of the Sun & Turn Your Face to the Wind, 2024
Multisensory installation (performance, scent, sound and mapping), dual-channel video
Dimensions variable
5. Urbonas Studio
Swamps and the New Imagination, The Book Unfolded, 2020–2022
Indigo print on paper
Excerpts from *Swamps and the New Imagination* (Sternberg Press and MIT Press, 2022)
Dimensions variable
6. Sharmila Wood with Amelia Wallin
Bureau of Water, 2026
Nomadic library installation
Dimensions variable
7. Daniel Jan Martin
Whole Perth Catalogue, 2019–ongoing
Online publication
Dimensions variable
8. Nien Schwarz & Rory Mahony
underFOOT, 2024
Film 14:24 minutes
9. Sao Sreymao
Under the Water, 2026
Wax, mirror and cloth
10. Khvay Samnang
Untitled, 2011
Single-channel video
4 minutes 17 seconds, loop
11. Imani Jacqueline Brown
What Remains at the Ends of the Earth?, 2022
Video installation and print
Dimensions variable
Sound design by Andrea Catherine Steves and the artist
12. Tomoko Hayashi
My Heart Floats in the Water, 2025
Video installation with sound, silk organza (dyed with lichen from the pond)
Sound: Takeshi Azuma
Research support: Mizorogaike Aquatic Biology Research Group