

Parched
La Trobe Art Institute
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Alvin Darcy, Jesse Boylan with
Adam John Cullen, Nici Cumpston,
Treahna Hamm, Ponch Hawkes,
Yaseera Moosa with Bridget Chappell,
and Shirely Purdie

CURATED BY: Prof. Jacqueline Millner,
Dr Karen Annett, and Amelia Wallin

In memory of Robbie Dixon, 1986 to 2024

INTRODUCTION

Professor Jacqueline Millner

How is drought a cultural phenomenon? And were we to augment the scientific and economic frames most used to understand drought, what insights might we yield to help us better imagine, prepare for, and adapt to a changed climate?

These are the questions at the heart of *Parched: cultures of drought in regional Victoria*, an interdisciplinary ARC-funded project based at La Trobe University over 2021–2024. The project is structured according to both place and time, with a focus on four regions – Albury Wodonga, Mildura, Shepparton, and Bendigo – and four historically significant droughts – Federation, World War II, Millennial and the current event (provisionally dubbed the Tinderbox). As researchers, we acknowledge that difficult questions, such as, how can Australia better respond to the increasingly extreme and frequent weather events associated with climate change, require innovative processes and collaborations. Hence, we structured our research as a genuinely interdisciplinary conversation, with contributions from historians, media studies scholars, literary theorists, climate scientists, art historians and artists, encompassing a broad range of methods including oral histories, archival research, and visual and literary analysis. In addition, we acknowledge that creative means of exploring experience and communicating ideas have unique capacities to shift established thinking, forge new links, and honour the affective dimensions raised by the research. Hence, working in partnership with regional galleries and arts organisations, we embedded artist residencies in each of the four locales as an integral part of the research.

There is a strong tradition of durational, site-based artistic responses to environmental crises. Artists living among community and place, listening and witnessing with a curious and creative sensibility, may evoke the complexity of the cultural experience of drought to rebut the one-size-fits-all visual stereotypes of cracked earth, animal carcasses and stoic solitary male farmer. In *Parched*,

we were interested in the deeply embodied creative responses of artists, for their potential both to decentre our more traditional ways of doing research and to reveal and capture those more elusive imaginaries of drought.

TIMELY WATERS: SCARCITY AND OVER-ABUNDANCE

Dr Karen Annett and Amelia Wallin

This research-led exhibition draws together artworks from across Australia, with an eye to the southeast, to explore representations of drought. Artworks from La Trobe University's Art Collection and Shepparton Art Museum intermingle with the work of four artists (and their collaborators) who undertook drought-focused research residencies on Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri and Latji Latji Countries. Drought is often seen as a defining characteristic of Australian settler folklore; think only of the trope of the lone farmer standing upon cracked earth. To expand on our understanding of how drought is experienced and represented, this exhibition gathers First Nations knowledge and settler perspectives. Here, the visiting resident artists' temporary experiences of place converse with ancient connections to Country, and the knowledge of traditional custodians intermingles with the comparatively recent perceptions of multi-generational settler farmers.

One can't speak about drought without speaking about water, as drought is defined as its absence. Indeed, when approaching the subject of drought many of the artists-in-residence including Jesse Boylan, Yaseera Moosa and collaborator Bridget Chappell, turned their attention to the colonial tools used to organise, dispense and store water such as irrigation systems, barrages, weirs and reservoirs. These systems represent a desire to manage water as a scarce economic commodity, whereas works by Alvin Darcy and Treahna Hamm put forwards a more nuanced cultural understanding of water management, grounded in reciprocity. Ponch Hawkes

reflects the experiences of generations of agricultural settlers affected by the millennial drought. Shirely Purdie records the aftermath of a flood that affected her and her community, and Nici Cumpston recalls the Mulyawongk Creation Story, which safeguards children and rivers. From the impact of flood and drought on Country, to the personal and economic toll felt by farmers, to soil as a carrier of information, to ancient traditions of preservation and repair, and the slow violence caused by disrupted land care, the artworks reflect on the ongoing impacts of a changed climate and how we might best respond.

Treahna Hamm

Yorta Yorta artist Treahna Hamm tells multi-layered stories tied to her experience living with and by the Murray River in Northern Victoria and Southern New South Wales. Hamm's 1995 work *Drought Spirit* recalls an egg or seed like form. Inside, safeguarding its contents, are three spirit figures. From Hamm's title, we can understand these figures as the drought spirits. The spirits are protecting the seed of life, ready to bloom when the rains awaken it. Alongside the spirits are what could be seeds, roots, branches or even fish, each waiting to sprout forth from their protective shell. In Hamm's work, drought is not barren or unproductive. Instead, it is represented as a time of hibernation or incubation under the protection of the spirits.

Pre-colonisation there were complex rhythms at play, efficient systems that the world's first peoples understood and coexisted with. These were ignored by the settler colonists who, unattuned to the ancient rhythms of Kaiela (meaning 'father of waters'), built on floodplains alongside the Murray and redirected its flows, turning the shared and sustained river system into an unpredictable and vulnerable commodity. Hamm's *Drought Spirit* evidences a deep respect for, and trust within, natural cycles. There is no hurry for the egg to hatch, or for drought to break. In the old times no extractivist demands were made of the river;

for thousands of years Yorta Yorta people cared for Country and adapted to its extremes including times of scarcity and abundance.

Shirley Purdie

"This is the first time in history [the river] has come up this high", remarked Dallas Purdie, resident of Warmun, in 2011.¹ In March of that year torrential rain fell onto the already sodden ground and swollen river ways of Warmun, one of East Kimberley's largest Aboriginal communities. The weather event destroyed or significantly damaged over eighty percent of the community's buildings. Just one year later Dallas' mother, senior Gija artist Shirley Purdie, exhibited *That Warrambany (Flood Water) from last year, bin hanging that whole freezer up in our tree. He's still there today*, at Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne – with her home at Warmun still in disarray after the floods.

Embracing the rich textures of the ochres and wood from her Country, Purdie's technique is true to the Ngarrangkarni (Dreaming) of her culture. She follows a rich tradition of art and story from the Kimberly region, including those of her late mother, Madigan Thomas, Uncle Jack Britten, as well as Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie. The sculpture depicts recent catastrophic events with a sense of wry humour. For nestled in the "painted-up tree", beneath its emu-feather leaves, is a miniature painted freezer.² The juxtaposition of a presumably heavy freezer within the branches of the tree appears absurd, however, the sight of white goods in trees was well-documented by media and artists at the time. Purdie's work is significant to the sudden loss of flood-affected areas of people, lands, waterways, trees, wildlife and everyday life in the face of ongoing disasters. The work pays homage to the strength and resilience of her people and Country – across deep time and through recent tragedies.

Alvin Darcy

RESIDENCY: Shepparton Art Museum,
Yorta Yorta Country (Redcliffs)

The disturbance of traditional cycles of care is also of concern to Alvin Darcy, a proud Yorta Yorta and Taungurung man. Darcy's time in residence at Shepparton Art Museum provided an opportunity to spend time on Country and look closely at works in the collection, by artists such as Nici Cumpston. During his residency, Shepparton experienced flooding, which led Darcy to recall stories of the long-neck turtle and its capacity to adapt to changing waterways. But with water flows becoming increasingly irregular and unpredictable, adaptation for all species becomes difficult. Darcy's resulting artwork, *Next on the list*, challenges our current tolerance for a reality where plant and animal species are routinely becoming extinct. The sculptural installation is a distilled adaptation of Darcy's signature artform of pyrography (a technique of freehand burn marking). It draws, also, from his skills in wood carving and tool making, along with his cultural understanding of shifting land use and its environmental impact.

In this installation, 31 timber stumps are blackened with fire, remnants of the foundations of settler houses erected on drained swamps across Yorta Yorta Country. The undulating burns on the surface of the wood create tidal-like scars, simultaneously recalling rising flood waters and the devastation of fire in times of drought. The burnt wood is also suggestive of First Nations techniques of land management and cultivation through fire and burning practices. The placement of empty coolamons, carved by the artist, evoke ancient cultural water carrying practices and the natural river systems which filled them, or perhaps the upturned shells of turtles. For Darcy they also "indicate the presence of my ancestors in the area, and the adaptation that they would have had to utilise to combat drought. They kind of link the story of the past and the present and future at the same time."³ Together, these elements invite reflection on our present experience of extreme weather alongside a future where cultural knowledge aids repair.

Nici Cumpston

"Everywhere I walked I could see evidence of Aboriginal peoples' occupation of this land," remarked artist Nici Cumpston on her time spent in the Rushworth State Forest outside of Shepparton.⁴ The artistic practice of Cumpston, who is of Afghan, English, Irish and Barkandji heritage, pushes the boundaries of documentary photography. Her large-scale photographs are hand coloured, drawing attention to sites and markers in the landscape of indigenous significance. While walking through the Whroo Historic Reserve, a gold mining area near Rushworth, Cumpston described a sense of strong unease and of being watched. The photograph, *Mulyawongk, Whroo, Rushworth State Forest* depicts this uncanny feeling. In this image, the Xanthorrhoea (grass tree) could be mistaken for a hooded figure emerging out of the forest, surveilling – perhaps judging – those passing through. For Cumpston, the vegetation brought forth memories of a Ngarrindjeri cultural story, where the Mulyawongk (likened to a bunyip) would rise from the river if a child swam alone or took more fish than they could eat from the river. Cumpston says, "the story of the Mulyawongk has stayed with me since I was a child growing up along the Murray River in South Australia."⁵ This is a lesson in reciprocity, in respecting what is given and not taking more than you need.

Yaseera Moosa with Bridget Chappell

RESIDENCY: Worskspace 3496,
Latji Latji Country (Redcliffs)

When arriving in Red Cliffs, 16 kms south of Mildura, Yaseera Moosa described how the interloper is likely to have a vastly different understanding of place to that of long-time residents. Yet without the denizen's intimate knowledge of the geographies, histories and cultures that reside in a place, the visitor might notice things that are lost to locals due to habitual viewing. "I was looking for something sublime" comments Moosa, of her time in Mildura, "a moment in which the grape vines and citrus and almond orchards

give way to evidence of their vast system.”⁶ The aimless drives undertaken in this pursuit gave rise to a new series, *Plumbing*, shot on medium format film. Instead of the sublime, what Moosa encountered was “distributed and mundane” infrastructure that “emerged constantly and anticlimactically.” Her title references the regulated and plumbed state of the Murray-Darling basin, whose banal infrastructure the series takes as its subject. As a verb, plumbing also refers to trying to understand something mysterious. The longest river on the continent, the Murray spans a distance too vast to traverse, let alone capture, during Moosa’s three-week residency. Instead, this keenly observed series examines the excesses that it can’t contain. Seen together, the photographs produce a patchwork of water infrastructure and its resulting landscapes.

On residency, Moosa found that the words of fellow artist and former Mildura resident Bridget Chappell resonated strongly. The two extended their conversation through a new video work made in collaboration that explored the resonances between Mildura and other irrigation settlements built on deserts, including in Palestine and California. In these colonised territories, irrigation systems promised to defeat arid conditions providing the promise of “making deserts bloom”.

On the cusp of Australia’s Federation Drought, Alfred Deakin (then state minister for water, later prime minister, architect of the White Australia Policy) led an 1885 royal commission to California to study irrigation settlements. Mildura was the first of such settlements to be established in Australia. Specifically, Moosa and Chappell attempt to follow Mildura’s irrigation drip tape back to its sources, both historically and infrastructurally. Their poetic video work examines the impact of irrigation infrastructure on the Murray River system where, as Chappell observes, “the river appears as a miracle”. And it is this miracle that is extracted and drained, diverted and polluted, “intersected by the labyrinthine system of locks, weirs, pipes and channels that tap the river”.⁷

Chappell also presents a new installation that responds to her time spent along the Murray River. Here, recycled and reclaimed

glass fragments arranged by colour and form echo the flows of the river. Tracing its icy headwaters through various flows, this is the river viewed from both within and above, fracturing into tributaries, pooling into billabongs and lakes. Conversely, this is also the river disrupted by locks and barrages, laced with pollutants from run-off from agriculture. Reflecting and refracting light, this stained-glass work evokes the river’s surface, diverted and extracted over its 2500 kilometres length.

Jesse Boylan with Adam John Cullen

RESIDENCY: Murray Art Museum Albury,
Wiradjuri Country (Albury)

Working in the domain of expanded documentary, artist Jesse Boylan is interested in the role art can play in environmental and social issues. In recent years their focus has honed on the invisible pollutants and toxins in our atmosphere, and the ‘slow violence’ of climate change. For *Parched*, Boylan undertook a residency on Wiradjuri Country, where their interest led them to the phenomenon of dust and dust storms as a byproduct of drought and invasive farming practices. As Boylan observes, ‘when collected, stored, and studied, dust can reveal information about who we are and how we live.’⁸

On residency, they spent time at Lake Hume, the furthest upstream of the major reservoirs on the Murray River system, visited soil archives and spoke with local farmers, one of whose personal photographs is reproduced in this exhibition. This research gave rise to a two-channel video essay-poem, *Where there is wind (there will be dust)*. The video work draws directly from conversations with livestock and crop farmers, field recordings of Lake Hume and its weir, a farmer threshing his fava bean crops, *a slag heap at Broken Hill, and scientists and lab technicians at the Tanco Soil Archive and CSIRO National Soil archives*. In Boylan’s imagery, water, dust and fog drift, vast and borderless, creating a stark contrast to the sterile lab depicted on the adjacent screen. This jarring meeting is underscored by the foreboding sound of

wind and the sense that there is an mounting and uncontrollable threat. Despite attempts to restrain the forces of nature, be it through the careful archival work of scientists or seemingly impenetrable dam walls, these forces remain uncurtailed.

Also in this exhibition, Boylan presents a series of photo-gravures. Photogravures are a photo-mechanical process whereby a photopolymer plate is ingrained to reproduce detailed continuous tones of a photograph. Rather than the photographic result, Boylan has chosen to include the plates themselves. Images of slag and silt and tangled root systems of trees found by the Murray River appear as ghostly echoes, etched into jewel toned plates. For Boylan, the etched and eroded surface of the plates speak to the multiple histories that are imprinted onto Murray River Country.

At the invitation of Boylan, a new sculpture by Adam John Cullen is also presented here, made in direct response to Boylan's research. Where Boylan's work draws our attention to the intangible, Cullen's focus is the material. Dust becomes clay and solidifies in Cullen's *crust to core (responding to jb)*. These sculptural forms appear to be in a process of formation, slabs of earth pulled from the ground to be studied and dissected. Conversely, they can also be perceived as eroding ruins, soon to return to dust. Against the gentle backdrop of colours that reference the blue and yellow of the Munsell soil colour chart, Boylan and Cullen's installation is an emotional paradox. The sense of detached scientific observation is undercut by the emotional intensity of the "creeping nature of the crisis that is underlying it", that is the slow build of dust.

Ponch Hawkes

RESIDENCY: La Trobe Art Institute,
Djaara (Bendigo)

Renowned feminist photographer Ponch Hawkes undertook a residency at La Trobe Art Institute on Djaara. With a long track record of community engagement projects, such as *500 strong* (2020–22), which rely on the willingness of participants to disclose intimate aspects of their lives and bodies, Hawkes hoped

to focus on the emotional language of drought and its gendered experience. The artist found, however, that her traditional way of working, through photographic portraiture, was not the most apposite to the subject. Instead, teaming up with Karen Twigg, one of the Parched project's oral history specialists whose settler farming family has deep roots in the region, Hawkes found this rare access to interviewees highly generative. She both observed and complemented Twigg's interviews, listening with a creative ear, trained over many years as an artist-facilitator, for the affective experience of drought, distilling it in selected quotes. These form the heart of her installation.

Excerpts from those conversations are recorded on handwritten cards, perched on a shelf reminiscent of family photographs displayed on a mantelpiece. Viewers are invited to handle these short texts which embody the struggle and adaptation of the East Loddon community during the Millennial drought. Suspended from the ceiling, photographic banners depict the dry patchwork of land that multi-generational farming families have worked to sustain their livelihoods against the ravages of drought. The fabric works rest upon soil taken, with Djaara permission, from the tilled farmland that was, and always will be, Djaara Country.

- 1 Matt Bamford, *Warmun marks 10 years since disastrous flood leaves trauma, destruction in its wake*, ABC news, 20 Mar 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-20/warmun-flood-anniversary-aboriginal-fraud-natural-disaster/13249462>
- 2 Maya Hodge, *Shirley Purdie*, text commissioned by La Trobe Art Institute, 2022.
- 3 Interview with Alvin Darcy, <https://parchedresearchproject.com.au/stories/next-on-the-list/#:~:text=Water%20carriers%20that%20I'll,future%20at%20the%20same%20time>
- 4 Nici Cumpton, artist statement, <https://maph.org.au/artworks/1883/#:~:text=The%20story%20of%20the%20Mulyawongk,a%20child%20does%20something%20wrong>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Email correspondence with the authors
- 7 Email correspondence with the authors.
- 8 Jesse Boylan artist statement, <https://www.mamalbury.com.au/exhibitions/jesse-boylan-where-there-is-wind-there-will-be-dust>

REFLECTIONS

For each of the *Parched* resident artists, documentation has been integral to learning about their temporary surroundings. Through notetaking, recordings, photography, video and drawing they have engaged with the environment and communities around them and explored the impacts of drought. In a short space of time they might have glimpsed a weather event, witnessed the legacy of a lengthy wet or dry spell or seen traces of environmental disruption. But the snapshot they capture is best understood when considered in the context of ancient knowledge systems. The oral cultures of traditional custodians of Country describe the seasonal cycles of weather across tens of thousands of years. In contrast, these non-Indigenous observations of change are evidence of the climate catastrophe that has been slowly building since the Western advent of industrialisation.

Now when we speak of drought, we now also speak of flood, and bushfires, and cyclones. In our volatile climate, environmental rhythms are disrupted; our daily news reports unprecedented monsoons in the same breath as unseasonal snowfall and catastrophic fire. Weather events are becoming unpredictable at best and devastating at their worst. And throughout all this, are artists; recording the impacts of extreme weather on regional communities, in the case of Purdie and Hawkes. Or, as in the work of Darcy, Hamm and Cumpston, using cultural knowledge to aid in repair and for the preservation of ecological balance. Moosa and Chappell connect the extractive systems of settler agriculture to other colonized territories built on deserts, while the work of Boylan and Cullen makes visible the slow violence of environmental emergency. The creative research of these nine artists is the driving force of this exhibition. Together they paint a complex and multifaceted picture of drought as a symptom of an environment increasingly out of balance which will not be solved by western science alone. Through sharing cultural knowledge and traditional stories, bearing witness, collecting data, their reflections broaden our understanding of drought. Viewed together, these artworks can help us better adapt to and prepare for the change that is already happening.

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