

Unit 3: Art as Knowledge



Figure 4. *Experimental work*

IA1

How do artists respond to the state of flux in the natural world?

Summary

Inspired by the bushfire devastation and the overwhelming parched scape, my intention is to explore the state of flux, in the natural world. This investigation is in response to the personal experience and sensory reaction I felt while staying at a rural location near Crow's Nest and while driving through NSW over the holidays. The focus for my body of work will be *the changes and transformations that are currently occurring in the environment*. My artwork is informed by Fred Williams' exploration of *the land and nature through a formal context*. Janet Laurence offers a contemporary context in her response to nature.

Introduction

Art embraces the purpose, expression, imagination and exploration of an artist's journey through life. This investigation responds to the sensory experience and personal context evoked while visiting a rural location. Getting away from my usual urban surroundings, I encountered new experiences when immersed in country life. Surrounded by endless amounts of dirt, trees, fresh air and peaceful sounds, I was inspired to explore the flux and growth visible in the natural world. Flux encompasses the action or process of flow and continuous change. This rural environment highlighted the delicate structures of our ecosystem that are permanently in a state of transformation due to changes in the climate and seasons. Observing the surrounding flora and fauna which was exposed to harsh and unpredictable conditions, highlighted how transient and fleeting ecosystems can be. The revelation that nothing lasts or stays the same forever; change and transformation is a consent state of flux. My two artists, Fred Williams and Janet Laurence, respond to change in the natural world.

Building on this stimulus, over the holidays I drove through NSW along the coastal line and witnessed the recent bushfire attacks, the flux and fragility of the land. I intend to communicate visually how things change and explore the beauty of rejuvenation, as with damage comes new life and growth. I observed the colours of the harsh black background against the vivid red and white untouched underlayers of vegetation, highlighting natural contrasts and aesthetics.

Key artist 1

Fred Williams developed a personal contemporary approach to abstracting the landscape. He responded to open spaces of the bush and fragile Australian landscape. "Burnt Landscape", 1968 (figure 2) created after bushfires ravaged the Dandenong ranges in Victoria was part of a series providing a comprehensive account of the tragic event, the moments of destruction and the eventual renewal of the forest. "The space opens up and gives a sweeping view of the blackened wastes," (McCaughey, 1984). The high horizon line allows for a moving grandeur with a balanced blackened landscape juxtaposed with wrath-like remains of burnt bush. "Fire strips away the undergrowth and the viewers eye travels unaccountably across the canvas and through the landscape" (McCaughey, 1984). A deep, dark foreground reinforces the intensity of the fire, transforming the landscape with the ecosystem. "This painting focuses on the formal elements of line, colour and surface to capture open spaces" (Creative Victoria, N.D). Williams is renowned for his aerial perspective, using dots, dashes and slashes to create a painterly code. "I'm trying to incorporate everything there, so that all that atmosphere is reduced to one spot of paint" (McGregor et al, 1969, p107). This approach reduces and refines his marks to a type of calligraphy using the tonal palette as they become minimal and elegant, a contemporary approach at the time due to the reduction of content into the symbol of the mark.

Williams' palette of the burnt landscape is evident in my painting (Fig.3). Loose representations of trees as marks or brushstrokes, offer an abstract snapshot of the landscape. In my work, I explore snapshots of forest or vegetation with vertical elements

suggesting structure and growth. Faint white lines in Williams's painting suggest that the trees are ghosts of what they once were, symbolising the flux of the natural environment.

Key artist 2

Janet Laurence through her multi-disciplinary practice, focuses on the natural world, its beauty, complexity and future environmental challenges. Her work questions our understanding, co-existence and the fundamental concept of survival, growth and flux.

"Theatre of Trees" consists of video projection, printed and hand-painted photographic images of nature and trees on reflective fabric. The 6m layers of fabric hang in circular compositions that feel fluid and create a three-dimensional experience of walking through the ethereal space. As the title suggests, "Theatre of Trees" has characteristics of the mythological, philosophical, scientific and experiential, setting the scene for an interconnected relationship. Photographic images, historical and mythological drawings have been reproduced, manipulated with paint and Photoshopped, then printed onto voile. Loose fluid images are veiled and layered allowing the viewer to look through the surface, creating a ghostly effect (MCA, 2019). The large-scale vertical sheets provide form and spill down so the viewer can only take in the resolved image at the point of entry. Laurence uses video projection to create movement through the space like sunlight hitting trees.

Her work communicates an environmental message, "an ecological quest" (MCA, 2019). She seeks to raise the alarm for extinction and ecosystem depletions by engaging the viewer and inviting reflection on the fragility of the natural world, its plight and potential restoration. Her ability to connect with the viewer and think deeply about the message is something that I would like to explore and achieve in my work.

My experimental work (fig.4) explores the fragility of the landscape. I photographed the burnt landscape with new growth and combined them with photographs of more open surroundings. Like Laurence's artwork, it invites you to experience both the macro and micro viewpoint. Bright yellow jelly was applied to develop a layer of colour transparency

symbolising flux and depict a personal lens through which to view constant changes. Jelly is fluid and creates distortion of imagery.

Experimental research

My experimental work explores, through the formal context, changes and flux in the natural world focusing on the recent bushfires, growth and fragility of our land. My painting (figure 3) uses broken lines and a rich colour palette to capture the structural beauty of the rural landscape. The dark background evokes the burnt landscape and contrasts with fresh coloured growth. Repeated vertical marks, reminiscent of Williams's painting, suggest strength and renewal. I chose to abstract the forms with no horizon line, exploiting the formal elements of line, repetition and colour to communicate the layered landscape of trees and explore viewpoint. I extended this abstraction into a digital artwork (figure 4) which explores layers and multiple horizon lines. By applying the knowledge that Williams conveys regarding vertical lines and high horizon line, I created segments and abstracted panels of burnt landscape. The overall effect is a darker lower half symbolising life lost and a lighter backdrop with silhouettes at the top symbolising renewal. This experimental photo (figure 4) is also informed by Laurence's work as it explores layers and transparency so the audience can experience the renewal and *Obscured*. The photographic elements reference Laurence's process in developing layers.

"*Obscured*" (figure 5) features a strong horizon line in the bottom third of the composition to locate the viewer, a reference to Williams. The lower section is a close-up of the landscape depicting growth of a new bud on a scorched burnt tree. This is juxtaposed against an inverted macro image of the burnt landscape. The inverted image and the yellow jelly explore diverse lenses and 'ways of seeing'. The artwork is both static yet fluid. Reference to "Theatre of Trees" and "Burnt Landscape" is evident in the transparent layers, 'veiling' and combination of micro details with the linear imagery. My aim to develop this

technique of combining imagery with layers of transparency, to interpret the ephemeral nature of flux.

“*Pangea* “(figure 7) is an experimental sculptural work exploring the idea that books are made of paper which comes from trees. This is a statement about trees lost in the making of books and the need to look after our fragile environment. The maps make connections to geographical locations that require a higher level of awareness. The dominant vertical layers are similar in structure to Laurence’s layers in the construction of “Theatre of Trees”. One idea for future experimentation is to create a series on totem like structures based on this form.

Conclusion

Janet Laurence and Fred Williams both respond to the state of flux in the natural world and have informed my art making. Laurence communicates contemporary context through large scale installations so the viewer can experience the transitory space and understand the fragility the environment faces. Williams through his use of minimalist marks and colour captures the scale of the vast landscape. Flux is a conceptual, yet factual phenomenon and artists explore the concept by giving form to knowledge.

Focus

My inquiry question is a response to stimuli and draws upon my personal experience. My focus will explore and communicate *the knowledge surrounding flux, within the natural world*. Knowledge develops a sense of familiarity and discovery, and when paired with flux, options for learning and experimentation are rich. I plan on exploring the formal elements to communicate layered meanings about change and transformation. Laurence’s installation of manipulated photography, transparency and multiple layers provides ideas about current issues and techniques that I intend to explore. My work will aim to simplify, abstract and create engagement by provoking informative ideas about flux.

Reference List

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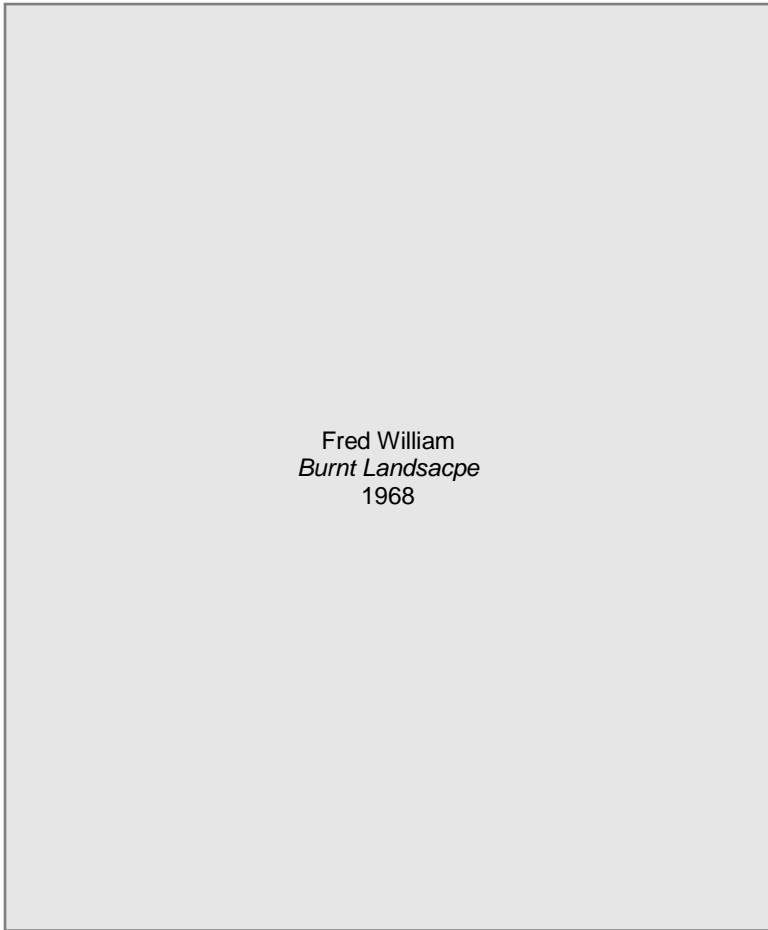
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Fred William
Burnt Landscape
1968

Figure 1.
Fred Williams, *Burnt Landscape*, 1968,
oil on canvas, 183 cm x 152.5 cm

Image can be viewed national Gallery f
Australia:
<https://nga.gov.au/exhibition/williams/default.cfm?IRN=202743&BioArtistIRN=15718&MnuID=3&GalID=4&ViewID=2>



Janet Laurence
Theatre of Trees
2018

Figure 2.
Janet Laurence, *Theatre of
Trees*, 2018-19, installation
view, *Janet Laurence: After
Nature*, Museum of
Contemporary Art Australia,
Sydney, 2019



Figure 3.
Experimental work, *Journey*,
2019
acrylic on canvas, 60cm x 29 cm



Figure 4.
Experimental work, *No end in sight*, 2020, Photograph, 30cm x 42 cm



Figure 5.
Experimental work, *Obscured*, 2020,
Photograph, 30cm x 42 cm

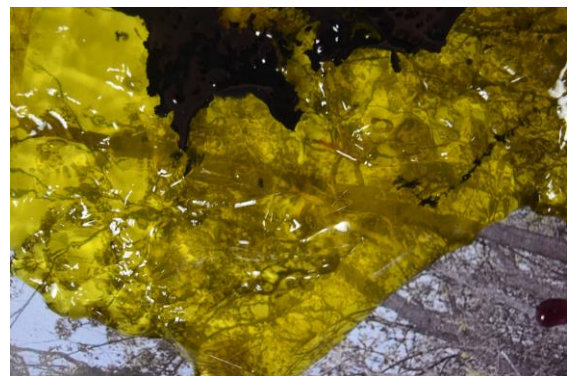


Figure 6.
Close up detail of "*Obscured*"



Figure 7.
Experimental work,
Pangea, 2020, Sculpture,
150 cm x 35 cm

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