

WILDERNESS TASKS

Fernando Sanchez Castillo (Spain)

Jess Day (Aus) Todd McMillan (Aus)

Alex Monteith (New Zealand)

Andrew and David Wood (Aus)

Curated by Emma Buswell

The Enigmatic Nature of Ball's Pyramid

Recently the millionaire adventurer Dick Smith complained that young people were sitting at home drinking, taking drugs and becoming obese. When he was 20, Smith went much of the way up Ball's Pyramid, a spectacular ocean peak, and from this climb learned to conquer his fears, founding the electronics retailer that bears his name. In the twenty-first century Ball's turned out to be significant not only for Smith's life. Scientists have recovered breeding pairs of a stick insect once thought to be extinct. Once common on the nearby Lord Howe Island, they had not been seen since the turn of the twentieth-century, when introduced rats killed them off. Now there is a good population of the insect in Melbourne Zoo, an artificial colony that far exceeds the natural one.

Ball's is, for both Smith and these insects, the refuge of a nature that has become hemmed in on all sides by the anthropocene. The pyramid rises from the sea like a fantastic sentinel of the past. Today, with explorers banned from landing on its shores, the peak has been assaulted instead by wingsuiters, who zoom along its edge before landing in the water beyond. The adventure takes just a minute, rather than a long day, with bodies laden down by camping gear. Fear is not negotiated in a feat of endurance and strength, but in an ecstatic rush, recorded for YouTube by a GoPro ('be a hero') camera. So it is that fear no longer leads to that romantic and natural sensation of the sublime, of looking out upon a scene that exceeds one's bodily self. Today's body is either supercharged, by wingsuits and jet skis, or left behind, in gaming consoles and virtual reality headsets. The reasons that Smith climbed Ball's are no longer as pertinent as they once were. Fear is constituted in a new way, by the ambitions of a few athletes, while the bodies of their audiences become more obese. So too businessmen like Smith, whose interests were much broader than business, are no longer heroes of the national economy. Instead, Dick's most recent business initiative, Dick Smith Foods, appears archaic next to the multinational quality of today's business practices.

It turns out, however, that Dick has also helped to usher in the end of nature as we once saw it. In 1978, he floated a fake iceberg of fire-fighting foam, shaving cream and white sheets onto Sydney Harbour, proclaiming that he had brought an iceberg from Antarctica. This was more than a prank for Smith, who wanted to float icebergs to Australia for their fresh water. In the end, he proved the impossibility of his idea, as he was unable to tow a natural block of ice. So it is that Smith's iceberg marks the beginning of a simulated nature in Australia, what Jean Baudrillard calls 'hyperreality'.¹ Baudrillard's examples of this come not from Australia, but from the United States. Here, visitors to the Grand Canyon ask their guides, 'what tools did they use?', and whether it was American Indians or New Deal labourers who built it. David Nye thinks that this comes from a sense of 'human omnipotence', in which 'the natural world seems an extension of ourselves, rather than vice versa.'² Nature is but an extension of the anthropocene, to be found where tour groups are taken, to marvel upon the magnificence of the capacity for human industry.



So it is that the nature of Ball's Pyramid has changed irrevocably, and now lies in Red Bull sponsored youtube videos, and in the stick insects that have taken up residence in Melbourne Zoo. These bugs are a metaphor for nature after the end of nature, as they breed into their thousands, a long way from their former home. For despite the studies of microorganisms living in submarine volcanos, the spectacle of taking samples from the rocks of Mars, the amplification of telescopes peering back into time, and the collision of neutrons in the Large Hadron Collider, we are no closer to understanding the human relationship with nature, or with matter itself. Nature remains either an omnipotent invention or an anachronism. In an ascent to Mount Everest, a climber will be stuck in traffic jam of climbers, and on safari in Tanzania one will be taken in a clutter of jeeps. The adventurer's desire to return to nature is a way of keeping the illusion of something beyond the anthropocene alive, while extending the anthropocene into new domains of thrilling experience.

The artists in this exhibition are new versions of the older, heroic idea of the adventurer, in an era in which adventure is conducted by proxy. Alex Monteith films a motorbike mono that appears and disappears into a vast beachscape. Andrew and David Wood peer into the desert from a pillbox. Fernando Sanchez Castillo drags the head of a statue across different landscapes, the characters in his film attempting to use nature to destroy it. Jess Day uses sculptured objects to survive in apocalyptic scenarios, and Todd McMillan tests his endurance by standing in the one spot, looking out at the ocean, over the course of a night. These adventurer-artists are more like nineteenth century Australian explorers than wingsuited fliers. For explorers like Leichardt, or Burke and Wills, the Australian landscape was but a prelude to an imaginary inland sea. As they went naming rivers and species in their wake they brought the country into being, summoning a landscape that was both actual and illusory at the same time. So too for these artists the landscape is both actually there and illusory, simulated in projections and on television screens, while being brought into being by their own presence within it. This is an arcane paradox in the twenty-first century, one that creates the idea of art and the artist amidst a perpetual flow of hyperreal simulations of landscape and nature. For the artist is indeed adrift in an era in which they no longer have a sensible role, in which their heroism, like the heroism of the explorer, is misplaced.

Darren Jorgensen

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, New York, Semiotext[e], 1983, p. 25.

2. David Nye, *The American Technological Sublime*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994, p. 279.

Dr Darren Jorgensen lectures in art history at the University of Western Australia. His research centres on aboriginal art history and art theory.

1. Alex Monteith
2.5 Kilometre Mono Action for a Mirage (2011)
35mm film, 3:29

Ascents and Descents in Realtime (23.03.08 v2) (2008)
Single-channel video installation, 16:00

Courtesy the artist and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.

2. Jess Day
Roadside Auspice: Disintegrative Other (2014)
Cement, welded steel, resin, bitumen, tarpaulin, steel plate

3. Andrew and David Wood
In Town and on Lake (Salt lake, Pillbox) (2011)
CRT TVs, DVD players, Looped two-channel video installation,
strap, 14:58

4. Jess Day
Roadside Auspice: Rugged Splendour (2014)
Cement, welded steel, resin, bitumen, tarpaulin, steel plate

5. Jess Day
Landcruiser Luminaries I (2015)
Car batteries, wiring, electrical tape, 20W bulb, headlight
casing, welded steel alligator clips, car seat lining

6. Andrew and David Wood
Shot on Landscape (Salt lake, Pillbox) (2011)
HD digital looped footage, 1:36

7. Andrew and David Wood
Landscape one (Salt lake, Pillbox) (2011)
dye sublimation print on aluminium

8. Andrew and David Wood
Reload One (Salt lake, Pillbox) (2011)
dye sublimation print on aluminium

9. Andrew and David Wood
Reload Two (Salt lake, Pillbox) (2011)
dye sublimation print on aluminium

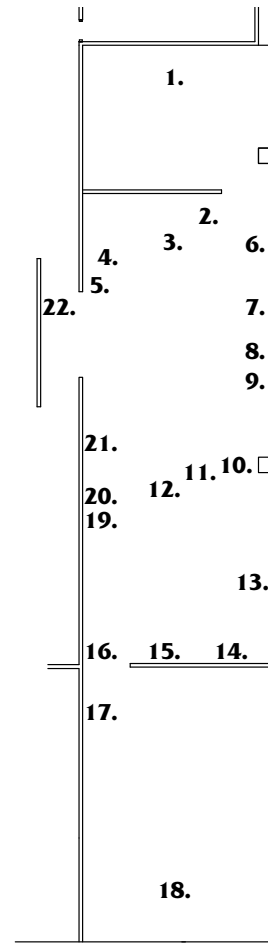
10. Jess Day
Caught in Fright I (2014)
Car wing mirror, steel bolt, beaten metal strap

11. Jess Day
Roadside Auspice: Camping Ahead (2015)
Cement, welded steel, resin, bitumen, tarpaulin, steel plate

12. Jess Day
Caught in Fright II (2014)
Car wing mirror, steel bolt, beaten metal strap

13. Jess Day
Three Sites, Three Nights (2015)
HD Digital looped footage, 14:00

14. Jess Day
Caught in Fright III (2014)
Car wing mirror, steel bolt, beaten metal strap



15. Jess Day
Roadside Auspice: Turn Back (2015)
Cement, welded steel, resin, bitumen, tarpaulin, steel plate

16. Jess Day
Roadside Auspice: No Fire (2015)
Cement, welded steel, resin, bitumen, tarpaulin, steel plate

17. Jess Day
Landcruiser Luminaries II (2015)
Car batteries, wiring, electrical tape, 20W bulb, headlight
casing, welded steel alligator clips, car seat lining

18. Fernando Sanchez Castillo
Rich Cat Dies of Heart Attack in Chicago (2004)
single-channel video installation, 22:23

19. Todd McMillan
Albatross (i) (2015)
Single frame 16mm colour film

20. Todd McMillan
By the Sea (i) (2015)
Single frame 16mm colour film

21. Todd McMillan
By the Sea (2004)
Digital looped footage of 16mm film, 1:12

22. Jess Day
Roadside Auspice: Outback (2014)
Cement, welded steel, resin, bitumen, tarpaulin, steel plate