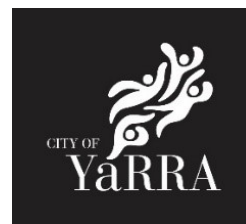


# ***Critical Limit: an urgent call for collective climate action***



4 August – 3 September 2022

*Yarra City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people as the Traditional Owners and true sovereigns of the land now known as Yarra. We also acknowledge the significant contributions made by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to life in Yarra. We pay our respects to Elders from all nations—past, present, and future.*

**Critical Limit** An introduction by Eliza Coyle  
School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne

*One can see from space how the human race has changed the Earth. Nearly all of the available land has been cleared of forest and is now used for agriculture or urban development. The polar ice caps are shrinking, and the desert areas are increasing. All of this is evidence that human exploitation of the planet is reaching a critical limit. (Stephen Hawking)*

World-renowned scientist Stephen Hawking implores us to see the empirical facts before us. Between 2010 and 2019, we witnessed the warmest decade ever recorded. While the Covid pandemic curbed emissions, it represented a brief pause in an otherwise rapid rise in global carbon omissions. The situation in which we find ourselves, as Hawking points out, is human-induced, and thus preventable, if we act collectively, now. *Critical Limit* is an impassioned response to this urgent call for collective action at Climarte, an exhibition space that harnesses art's potential to bring about meaningful climate action.

The exhibition presents nineteen works from renowned contemporary artists collected, on loan or commissioned by the City of Yarra since the 1990s. These artworks present multiple perspectives on climate change; pose thought-provoking questions; and highlight the unceasing commitment of local artists, activists, and grassroots' organisations to environmental issues. From debates around nuclear power to Victorian coal burning practices, the collection is both a record of the escalating climate crisis and an indictment to act.

This survey show coalesces around three central themes. The first is the mesmerising beauty of local animal and plant life. Leila Jeffreys's captivating digital work *Ornithurae* (2018) presents a video loop of brilliantly coloured budgerigars as they come to land and interact across the exposed branches of a tree. Captured in a studio environment, the scene is abstracted from nature. The close-up invites us to refine our gaze, framing details such as the unique shape of a bird's crest. Her emphasis on minutiae causes us to pause, to be present, and to see - as if for the first time - the intricacies of the animal world.

The second theme of local activism is explored through the pedagogical works of acclaimed, contemporary artist Emily Floyd; *Extinction Rebellion* posters; and multi-disciplinary artist, Michael Fikaris's commissioned artwork created for the show. Depicted on the central wall of Climarte, his mural reads: "Natural Climate Solutions, such as restoring degraded forests could create as many as 39 jobs per million dollars spent." The painting advocates for effective, achievable, and immediate actions like the replanting of trees to reduce emissions. Like the

political posters opposite, his work moves us from a state of overwhelm toward practicable actions.

The exhibition also investigates the colonial legacies of climate change. This residual perspective underpins our global economic system, which is predicated on overconsumption and a disregard for the natural world. Kent Morris's digital video *Waa and Wattle* (2022) tracks crows poised around bright-yellow, industrial materials in a diamond-like configuration. Through this reimagining of the built environment, the resilient patterns of First Nations' histories, stories, and philosophies surface. Morris highlights the deep embeddedness of this connection, noting, "nothing is more important than Country, caring for Country, and caring for the environment."<sup>1</sup>

*Critical Limit* seeks to inspire, inform, and mobilise us to act, moving us from our heads to our hearts. As award-winning climate scientist Jöelle Gergis points out, it is important to feel, to be sad, to be angry about the climate emergency that we are facing, it is "our hearts that will lead us back to our shared humanity, strengthening our resolve to save ourselves and our imperiled world."<sup>2</sup>

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### **City of Yarra Collection:**

Yarra City Council highly values the City of Yarra Collection and is the custodian on behalf of Yarra's residents. With over 900 items which include contemporary, civic, and public art, the Collection is an agent of local identity and heritage. It fosters community understanding, enjoyment, and appreciation of the visual and public arts. The volunteer expertise of the Visual Arts Panel has assisted Council in developing a strong collection with limited resources over the years and is integral to building Yarra's unique and wonderful cultural asset.

The City of Yarra Collection Policy and the Arts and Cultural Strategy focuses on contemporary artworks significant to Yarra as well as supporting artist that contribute to an ecologically sustainable future. Yarra was one of the first Councils to declare a climate emergency. Its declaration recognised the planet's climate is already too hot and that action is needed across all levels of government, businesses, and communities to address the climate crisis. Yarra has long been attractive to artists who respond to and live with these similar values and concerns. Consequently, the arts and the environment are at times inextricably linked and many of the works in this small survey exhibition reflect these interests and concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Kent Morris, "Kent Morris Discusses his Latest Exhibition at Richmond Town Hall," March 14, 2022.

<https://arts.yarracity.vic.gov.au/news/2022/03/11/kent-morris-discusses-his-recent-exhibition-at-richmond-town-hall>

<sup>2</sup> Jöelle Gergis, "The Great Unveiling: "I never thought I'd live to see the horror of planetary collapse,"" *The Guardian*, October 15, 2020, 3.30 am, AEDT. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/oct/15/the-great-unravelling-i-never-thought-id-live-to-see-the-horror-of-planetary-collapse>.

## **1. Alice Duncan**

*Black Hole (Lake Mungo), 2020*

framed archival inkjet print

93 x 93cm

on loan

This image forms part of an ongoing series by Alice Duncan interrogating the tapestries of cultures in the Australian landscape. Created at Lake Mungo, NSW, on the traditional lands of the Barkandji /Paakantyi, Mutthi Mutthi and Ngiyampaa people, the sacred site represents an important, yet often overlooked, natural landmark within Australia. It is a site that has and continues to be studied for its past climatic and environmental events and history. Since the 1960's, it has been the location of an ongoing and often tense dialogue between Aboriginal people and settlers. The black hole motif represents contradictions within photographic representations of land. Placed within the site itself, it both adds to and takes away from the image, erasing information from the landscape. The black circle motif symbolises the erasure of the Indigenous perspective in representations of the landscape.

## **2. and 3. Michael Fikaris**

*Truth is Essential (2021-22)*

mural and digital drawing

acrylic; fine art giclee print on archival paper

mural: 3m x 3m; print: 2m x 35cm

on loan/commission

Muralist and comic illustrator/artist Michael Fikaris highlights in his works uncomfortable truths about the state of the world as well as tangible solutions to the climate crisis through connections, nature, and its affinity. In both mural and comic form *Truth is Essential* is a passionate plea to learn more about adapting to a shared sustainable future, which requires an *exploration of change and adaption of new ways to live locally together*. The installation promotes achievable actions like the replanting of trees to reduce emissions, and his comic, which is notable for its recitation of common excuses made by climate deniers, aims to shake us from inaction and complacency with some hard truths.

## **4. Anonymous Rebels**

Extinction Rebellion posters: 2020

*No going back*

*Deeds, not words*

*Least we forget*

*Now we're cooking with gas*

*Protect the unburnt (possum)*

*Water is life*

hand stenciled with acrylic paint on packing news-print paper

61 x 40.5cm

unlimited edition

City of Yarra Collection

Originating in London in 2019, Extinction Rebellion (XR) uses direct action and civil disobedience to pressure governments to act justly on the climate and ecological emergency. Created using stencils on packing newsprint, the posters were pasted in the streets of Yarra to disrupt the bombardment of commercial advertising and attract the attention of the community to the climate crisis. Images and

ideas informed by XR's principles & values, including the Extinction Rebellion symbol, skulls, skeletons, the FUCXED CAPS and the Crimson typeface, were used alongside original designs created by local artists. The making of the posters was collaborative, with local artists sharing resources with XR artists from across Australia and around the world.

### **5. Mirdidingkingath Juwarnda (Sally Gabori)**

*Dibirdibi Country*, 2010

synthetic polymer paint on linen

198 x 101cm

City of Yarra Collection

Mirdidingkingath Juwarnda (Sally Gabori) was born around 1924 on the south side of Bentinck Island, of the South Wellesley Island Group in the Gulf of Carpentaria. In the late 1940s severe drought and high tides affected low-lying Bentinck Island, resulting in her entire community being moved to Mornington Island. Her confident painting of *Country*, using bold fields of red, white, and black acrylic paint maintains a record of the land, songs, and narratives associated with Dibirdibi, her husband's country in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Her paintings explore her knowledge, experience, longing, loss, connection, and her deep love in caring for Country.

### **6. Cameron Robbins**

*2/5/2010; hot, windy, 22 3/4 hours Shanghai*, 2010

ink, rain, and wind on paper

63 x 86cm

City of Yarra Collection

Cameron Robbins's work is based on interactions with natural forces and the elements, producing a collaboration between artist and nature. Using a self-made 'wind drawing machine', Robbins sets up these devices in different locations around the world to collect random wind energy and translate it into a strangely readable format of ink drawings on paper, which take on the form of a storm. These works have led to an exploration of the vortex, the focus of natural energy. With regards to renewables, power generation from wind energy has the benefit of not contributing to global warming or polluting the air.

### **7. Kathy Holowko**

Maquette '*The Unsung Hero*', 2018

plaster, wood, paint

25 x 25 x 35cm

on loan

*The Unsung Hero* was presented as part of the Edinburgh Gardens Plinth Program (2019). Holowko's practice focuses on narratives that explore our relationship to ecological cycles, prompting us to remember that we are all part of the earth's cycles and systems. In doing so we become more conscious of our actions and their impact. Holowko reminds viewers to make decisions and take actions that contribute to a sustainable future. The humble earthworm is one of the hardest working and most unrecognised members of our biotic community. They can eat half their body weight each day, turning decaying matter into nutrients for plants. Their burrows bring water and air deep into the ground providing the right conditions for root growth. Holowko has placed the earthworm on the plinth and rendered it prodigious in recognition of the tireless transfer of energy undertaken by these humble creatures.

## **8. *Batmania* 2017**

plaster, paper, paint

each: 40 x 60cm variable

on loan

*Batmania* is a more collaborative offering by Kathy Holowko. Commissioned by the City of Melbourne in 2017 for the Atrium, Federation Square, Holowko worked with environmentalists, scientists, conservators, and the curious to create 200 plaster-cast fruit bats by hand. Her work brings attention to this vulnerable species. Rising temperatures across the city in the summer, warmer winter nights and a decline of frosty conditions is currently endangering the bat species that has been listed as vulnerable. Holowko emphasises their most endearing qualities, rekindling our love for the animal world and thus our desire to protect it.

## **9. Kent Morris**

*Waa and Wattle*, 2022

single-channel digital video, silent,

3min

on loan: Courtesy of Vivian Anderson gallery

In this video, *Waa*, the Ancestral Crow, and protector is poised around industrial materials in a diamond-like configuration. As a plant, the wattle is known to withstand Australia's droughts, winds and bushfires and its wood had been used as a resource for various cultural practices. By reconstructing the built environment through a First Peoples lens, Kent Morris' practice reveals the continuing presence and patterns of Aboriginal history, culture, and knowledge in the contemporary Australian landscape, despite ongoing colonial interventions in the physical and political environments. By visually deconstructing and reassembling western systems, his work mirrors the methodical disassembly and denial of First Peoples cultural knowledge and highlights his desire to reshape and reaffirm contemporary thought, understanding and truth about the deep-time existence of Aboriginal philosophy, spirituality and knowledge and the role they continue to play today.

## **10. Silvi Glattauer**

*Renegotiating Campo Piedra Pomez*, 2020

photogravure with a la poupée colour

image size: 35 x 58cm; paper size: 57 x 76cm

City of Yarra Collection

This work from the series *Renegotiating the Landscape* deals with the issue of human intervention in the landscape. *Campo Piedra Pomez* (Pumice Stone Field) is located south of Argentina. A stunning landscape of white labyrinth formed by volcanic rocks set amongst giant dunes, volcanoes and coloured mountains. Although parts of this area are now protected there are very few natural places left on earth that have not been imposed on. Glattauer invites the viewer to *detach from the beauty of the grand vista and feel the disorientation this landscape represents*, to question our interference of the landscape through mining, production, and consumption, to rethink our connection to land, and to build a new relationship with it for the better.

## **11. Christine Johnson**

*Saltbush*, 2021

solar plate engraving, pigment print; drawing by artist

54 x 41cm

City of Yarra Collection

This image is part of a series that investigates the botanical legacy of Mallee botanist Eileen Ramsay, whose pioneering work documented the plants of the region. Saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia* Lindl) is a resilient survivor and defining feature of the semi-arid desert regions of Australia including the Mallee and areas affected by irrigation salinity near the Murray River. It is one of the few native plants able to tolerate salty soil conditions produced by land clearing for agriculture. Vast parts of Australia were once an inland sea. The impact of irrigation and agriculture on soil becomes salty as the ancient salt deposits are dissolved into the irrigation water and rise to the surface. As a result, soil becomes degraded, native plants and habitat disappear and groundcover is lost, leading to soil erosion, barren land, and desertification. Barren land is a slow-motion climate disaster. Saltbush has the capacity to help rehabilitate degraded land.

## 12. Jessi Wong

*The Land*, 2010

woodblock print on wenzhou ricepaper

185 x 85cm

City of Yarra Collection

*The Land* is part of a series of works by Jessi Wong that depict the *results of human follies* to inspire behavioral change. The landscape depicted in this work is a beautiful, but bleak, fragile and lifeless desert world. It is a subtle whisper, a quiet voice that hints at nihilism and faithlessness in humanity's ability to change and avert disaster. A prediction of things to come if the current course of carbon emissions continues at this rapid rate. With this work, Wong holds a mirror up to society. As she explains "*Genuine, long-term behavioral change must come from the heart. Making people want to change their environmental impact is equally as important as telling them how to do it.*"

## 13. Wendy Stavrianos

*Eastern Field*, 2008

acrylic, ink, and fabric protector on canvas

50.5 x 26cm (left) + 50.5 x 80cm (right)

City of Yarra Collection

Wendy Stavrianos explores absence and loss in the Australian landscape through themes of birth, death, and regeneration of the land. Inspired by T.S Eliot's poem *Preludes IV* and the line: *The worlds revolve like ancient women Gathering fuel in vacant lots*, Stavrianos also pays homage to Jean Francois Millet's painting *The Gleaners* (1857). Appropriating Millet's 'gleaner', the lone female figure gathers small pieces of grain typically left in the field by harvesters. Stavrianos highlights the fragility of the land due to overuse and land clearing for agriculture and brings to the fore an "*image of holding, of holding on to what is disappearing, what is in the process of being lost to us all, and to future generations.*"

## 14. Leila Jeffreys

*Ornithurae* 2018

digital work. single channel

continuous loop 6 minutes, 20 seconds

size variable, limited edition of 6

on loan

*Ornithurae* (bird tails) is an intimate portrait of native birds (pigeons, doves, cockatoos, budgerigars). Leila Jeffreys explores the symbiotic relationship that exists between these birds and their habitat. It draws parallel between the bonds that exist between humans, the way actions can shape collective behavior and the intimate dynamics of the flock. As evidence of the fleeting and precious nature of our ecosystem, *Ornithurae* is an ode to beauty, the wonder of the natural world and its power to inspire individual gestures of protection.

### **15. Helen Johnson**

*The Global Takeover Plan, 2009*

pencil, acrylic, paper, mount dialite

165 x 125cm

City of Yarra Collection

Socio-political ideologies form a backdrop to everyday existence in this work by Helen Johnson. A complex range of cultural signifiers surround an everyday scene capturing the apathetic state of affairs. Crafting a narrative where existential and socio-political matters are placed side by side with the complexities of everyday life and a more abstract collective consciousness, this personal tableau of individuals and objects, *reflects on broader principles of sacrifice, thrift, and a rejection of materialistic values*. Climate change is deeply intertwined with global patterns of inequality and certain social groups are particularly vulnerable to crises. While much progress has been made on the science and the types of policies needed to support a transition to low carbon, a challenge facing many countries is engaging politicians/citizens who may not understand the severity of the situation and garnering the support of those who are concerned that they will be unfairly impacted by climate policies.

### **16.and 17. Felix Wilson**

*Berlin Nocturne 1 and Berlin Nocturne 2, 2020*

b/w digital photographs

1: 82 x 62cm; 2: 42 x 32cm

on loan

Felix Wilson's work is concerned with visualising connections across ecologies in this moment of global environmental crisis. Developed as part of a larger project connecting brown coal to the nocturnal ecologies of cities, Wilson used case studies from Melbourne/Latrobe Valley and Berlin/Lusatia, where these works were made. Burning brown coal for electrical energy generation continues despite the transition towards renewable energy in Germany, where the technology allowing for its use as a fuel for electrical generation was developed, before being adopted by Victorian authorities after the First World War for the electrification of Victoria. The atmospheric disturbances of carbon dioxide continue to accumulate as the shadow of the illuminated city.

### **18. Alexis Beckett**

*Captured Grassland, Captured Pandanus, Captured Mangrove, 2010*

glass dome with decal and wooden base

23 x 15.5cm

City of Yarra Collection

Highlighting images of Australian habitats in black (for mourning) with songs of birds that are endemic to those habitats, Alexis Beckett's series of printed glass domes are about loss and absence in the Australian landscape. They point to changes caused by human activity, deforestation, climate change, urbanization, and overpopulation with reference to the Victorian fashion of collecting, stuffing, and displaying birds under glass domes. They are not necessarily endangered birds (or plants) but imply the whole eco system is seriously at risk of extinction.

## 19. John Wolseley

*From Siberia to the Kimberley - Each year the Wading birds return to the Mangrove Swamp*  
2012

lithograph

72 x 103cm

City of Yarra Collection

John Wolseley's practice shows how landscape can be thought of as a "*field of energy, rendered as passages of life, in which plant forms move or dance with rhythmic life.*" Coastal wetlands such as mangroves play a critical role as carbon sinks and natural infrastructure that provide food, timber, wood fuel, medicine, habitat and nurseries for fish and other wildlife. Their biggest threat is rising sea levels under climate change. Changes in sea level would alter flooding patterns and the structure and areal extent of mangroves.

***Critical Limit: an urgent call for collective climate action*** is presented as part of *Extraordinary Times requires Extraordinary Art*; Saturday 1 October, Thursday 13 October, and Saturday 22 October.

**Thank you:** Artists: Alice Duncan, Michael Fikaris, Kathy Holowko, Leila Jeffreys, Kent Morris, Felix Wilson, with collection artists Alexis Beckett, Extinction Rebellion, Sally Gabori, Silvi Glattauer, Christine Johnson, Helen Johnson, Cameron Robbins, Wendy Stavrianos, John Wolseley, and Jessi Wong. Climarte (Jo Lane and Deborah Hart), Arts and Culture team (Brona Keenan, Karra Rees, Raf McDonald, Olivia Allen, Deb Kundra), Samantha Green, Eliza Coyle, and David Keating.

For further details visit Yarra City Arts: [arts.yarracity.vic.gov.au](http://arts.yarracity.vic.gov.au)