Chapter 4. Visual Context

In this chapter, I investigate the work of contemporary artists who address concepts including extinction, beauty and loss. I have drawn on the work of artists who use a diversity of media to articulate their ideas, including Andy Warhol, Gregory Pryor, Christian Boltanski, and Australian artists Fiona Hall and Janet Laurence.

Andy Warhol

Lundquist described Andy Warhol as a modern priest, whose genius was demonstrated by his capacity to re-imagine mythic concepts in a manner that was accessible to people in post-industrial America.¹ Warhol was preoccupied with extinction and the shadow world and it was this anxiety that led him to re-establish old archetypes in common twentieth century images.² This preoccupation with extinction and the shadow world is evident in his Self-Portrait with Skull, illustrated below in Figure 4-1.

![Figure 4-1. Andy Warhol, Self-Portrait with Skull, 1977.](image)

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Lundquist claims that both art and religion have always concerned themselves with the concept of death, and that American culture ‘is an elaborate attempt to deny the reality of death’. It was in this milieu that Warhol effectively translated the old archetypes of death, evil, universal destruction, loneliness, fame and heroism into a form that we identify with and accept. Warhol linked:

- death with the electric chair and automobile accidents;
- evil with gangsters, and the most wanted series;
- fame with Marilyn Monroe;
- tragedy with John F. Kennedy;
- universal holocaust with the atom bomb.

In making these connections, Warhol elevated the commonplace in his work, investing it with a deep religious quality that was informed by his ‘sense of the dark power at the heart of popular collective experience’. The compositions of his works frequently use serial repetition, reminiscent of a mantra in language, or its visual counterpart the ‘yantra’ in which the repetition of images can induce an immersion in the aura of the sacred, a phenomenon that is typical in Tibetan Buddhist art. This repetition is evident in his screen printed images *Guns & Crosses* shown in Figures 4-2 and 4-3.

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In Lundquist’s view, it was Warhol’s preoccupation with extinction and the shadow world that led him to re-imagine the mythic in modern day artefacts ‘ushering them into the spiritual symbol pool of human kind’.\(^8\) Extinction was, for Warhol, a concern that contributed to his vast and enduring project.

Figure 4-3. Andy Warhol, *Crosses*, 1982. mixta/lienzo, 229 cm x 177 cm.

In contrast to Warhol’s project, my concerns regarding extinction deal with a fragment of human experience. While Warhol uses images from popular culture, my work depicts images of extinct plants that in all likelihood would be unknown to viewers of my art. Although the plants may be foreign, the wreaths, memorial board and the funeral urns are likely to be familiar to the viewers, carrying symbolic meanings from popular and age-old cultures. Lundquist’s observation, that American culture is ‘an elaborate attempt to deny the reality of death’\(^9\), applies in the Australian context. This salient observation helps to explain the silence that surrounds the extinction of plants in this community.

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Janet Laurence

Janet Laurence’s practice is informed by the phenomena of nature, its interconnectedness, the ebb and flow between its substances, the dynamic forces that sustain life and their destruction. Laurence is fascinated by the structures and systems such as science laboratories, natural history museums, botanical gardens and glasshouses that display collected elements of the natural world. Details from these sites are frequently referenced in her art.

![Image of stone blocks with text]

Figure 4-4. Janet Laurence, *Trace Elements*, 1997.
Outside: sandstone blocks from demolished Sydney buildings with text of extinct species in iron oxide. Size not specified.

In the piece *Trace Elements*, (1997), which was an installation at the S.H. Irvine gallery, Laurence is concerned with ‘inheritance and extinction, nature and culture, loss and memory, inside and outside’. The work consists of internal and external pieces and as is often the case with Laurence’s art the luminal space in between. The outside piece shown in Figure 4-4, is composed of sandstone blocks from ‘lost’ or demolished Sydney buildings which have been inscribed with the names of extinct Sydney plant species. The names are painted in iron oxide which appears to bleed into the graveyard of stone blocks. In the interior gallery space, Laurence has arranged stone blocks with

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glass plates etched with the names of the extinct species of plants. The space between the outside and the inside elements, where the window is, became a space bathed with reflections and shadows of lost plants (as shown in Figure 4-5).\textsuperscript{14} It is the space in-between that Laurence explores in many of her works, as they present sites of transience and transformation.

![Image](image.png)


Laurence’s art demonstrates a deep seated concern for ecology, however her work is also characterised by a deep ambivalence. This is apparent in her piece \textit{Ghost Glasshouse (Sarcophagi)}, 2003, in which glass panels are inscribed with images and names of endangered and extinct plants species. Its location amongst living plants creates what Couacaud describes as: ‘an almost shamanic site of invocation where extinct and endangered species can take on an imaginary existence’.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, while what is lost is remembered, there is also a hint that restoration is possible.

This possibility of death and nurture are entwined in a recent Lawrence work \textit{Cellular Garden}, shown in Figure 4-7. Both glasshouses and the vitreous paraphernalia of science laboratories have been referred in Laurence’s work because they represent paradoxical symbols: the containment of specimens collected for classification and experimentation, for display, for gestation and germination.

\textsuperscript{14} Emmett, \textit{Janet Laurence}, 22.  
In *Cellular Gardens* a single plant species is growing in a hand blown glass vial. In each of these displays, the plant is both venerable and precious. The pieces present a beautiful paradox, because they seem to demand that people need to protect these fragile surviving plants and they question whether the natural environment is still able, unaided, to fulfil this function.
Fiona Hall

Fiona Hall has produced an extensive and celebrated body of work and in what follows I discuss two pieces which address issues of plant exploitation, commercialization and the degradation of the natural environment due to human impact. In addition to these issues that connect to my art, Hall uses domestic textile techniques to fabricate some of her pieces. Furthermore, Hall’s work is, in my opinion, quite exquisitely beautiful.

Hall’s involvement with plants began in the 1980’s when she lived in close proximity to the Adelaide botanical gardens. Her residence there meant that she needed to walk through the gardens regularly, and it was, in part, these walks that informed her celebrated exhibition *Paradise terrestris*, shown in 1990. In a series of pieces in this exhibition, sardine tins and soft drink cans were manipulated to depict a plant form combined with the representation of a human reproductive organ.

![Image](image-url)


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The use of soft drink cans have also been used in *Medical bundle for the non-born child*, to make a poignant comment on the commercialisation and exploitation of plants (Figure 4-8). In this piece Hall used Coca-Cola cans cut into strips which are knitted into a baby’s layette. The homely act of knitting the layette, commonly associated with providing warmth and protection for a baby, is shattered by the harsh feel of the sharp strips of aluminium. The layette is meant to protect the baby but instead these garments would prove harmful. This idea, exploiting the visual domesticity of these objects to indicate harm, is reinforced by the inclusion of a six pack of teated ‘bottles’. These bottles indicate that Coke, rather than mother’s milk, is now the substance that will provide nourishment for infants, and yet Coca-Cola is known to cause harm to infants. The association of danger with the harsh feel of the layette and the consequent harm to an infant fed on a diet of Coca-Cola are entwined in this work. This piece questions the aims of this company and global commercialisation which it represents.

In addition, by presenting Coca-Cola in this sardonic form, Hall also indicates the degradation of the coca plant which was once revered in South America and Africa for its restorative and remedial properties. The restorative aspect of the plant has been ‘utterly supplanted and lost’ in the manufacture of Coca-Cola, which is recognised across the world as a symbol of global capitalism.

Hall’s use of knitting is a particularly poignant factor in this piece because it generates associations of care and nurture, attributes associated with motherly love. Kevin Murray comments on Hall’s use of craft techniques: ‘the elementary handicraft of the knitting introduces an agency of domestic being which has the capacity to bend global industrialism to its will’. Murray also recognises the domestic quality of handcrafts and their capacity to disrupt the capacity of industry to derive profit from the sale of domestic goods. Although my own work does not indicate the sale of domestic products, the use of hand embroidery in my art can be interpreted as a form of domestic protest to the

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17 Suhanya Raffel as quoted in Julie Ewington, *Fiona Hall*, 129.
18 Raffel as quoted in Ewington, *Fiona Hall*, 129.
impact of industrialisation on the natural environment. This idea will be developed further in the next chapter.

In her construction *Dead in the water*, 1999 (Figure 4-9), Hall indicates her environmental concerns by conjoining white PVC plastic plumbing pipe with beaded forms which were inspired by aquatic animals. The beads represent the unequal trade between colonisers and colonised while the PVC pipe represents the social underside of modern hygiene. The juxtaposition of the mass-produced bathroom pipes and the beautiful beaded aquatic forms indicate the off-shore trading between our water run off and the declining aquatic environment. Hall notes that ‘we take from nature to make our urges more comfortable and then throw back as debris. Now nature is throwing things back at us’ as apparent in the influence of El Nino.

Hall succinctly represents the human exchange between natural resources and human effluent in *Dead in the water*, which she describes as a ‘living death’.

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20 Ewington, Fiona Hall, 147.  
21 Ewington, Fiona Hall, 147.  
23 Ewington, Fiona Hall, 150.
Hall writes: ‘For most of us living in a world of manufactured products we tend to think that we are looking out at nature and forget that we are nature’.  

This idea makes powerful connections to the foundational premise of my art, as I too, maintain that people are affecting nature, albeit at times unwittingly.

**Gregory Pryor**

In the exhibition *Black Solander*, Gregory Pryor presented over a thousand drawings of living and extinct Western Australian plants. The drawings, in black ink on black sugar paper, create a ghostly appearance. Details of the botanical names and the time and place of their collection appear as spidery outlines in silver ink (Figures 4-11 and 4-12). Pryor’s drawings covered the entire wall surface in the gallery, from floor to ceiling - although they were hung in a manner which indicated that the wall surface was composed of a multitude of drawings as shown below in Figure 4-10.

![Figure 4-10. Gregory Prior, Black Solander, Installation, 2005. Perth Institute of Contemporary Art.](image)

In this installation Pryor represents the passage of time by indicating the date and place where the plants were collected and the names that were used to

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24 Fiona Hall, quoted in Hart, ‘Fertile interactions’, 204.
describe them. The collection of the plants specimens held in the solander boxes in the Western Australian Herbarium date from 1801. In this institution, the specimens are indexed and entered into the collection of scientific knowledge. The Herbarium and its records can be seen as a site which claims ownership or possession of the plants. It can also be viewed as an instrument in the dispossession of these plants (and the land which supported them), from the indigenous systems of knowledge and their claims to their country.\textsuperscript{26} This colonisation of the land and the impact on the indigenous population is acknowledged in Pryor’s drawings. This collection of drawings:

stand in for the living - the total flora of Western Australia - and for the dead, the disappeared, the erased - the plants that are no more, the indigenous people who have died or been moved away, the old, indigenous names which are no longer used or known to the new settlers, and so it seems, burnt away, leaving these charcoal coloured remnants.\textsuperscript{27}

Figure 4-11. Gregory Pryor, Drawing shown in \textit{Black Solander}, 2005.
Black ink on black sugar paper. Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. Size not specified.

Pryor has produced thousands of drawings of plants from the index of the Western Australian Herbarium. His installation of drawings represents the history of colonisation as evidenced by the collection and the indexing of

\textsuperscript{26} Neville Marchant, “Documenting the Diverse Western Australian Flora” \textit{Black Solander}, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, 2005, 17.

\textsuperscript{27} Barrett-Lennard, “Outline and Absence”, 3.
The drawings encompass both the dead and the living, describing the past and the present. They may also invite contemplation about the future. As Merchant writes: ‘they serve as a portent of that which we move uncontrollably towards’. It is this aspect of Pryor’s work which resonates with my artwork.

Figure 4-12. Gregory Pryor, Drawing shown in Black Solander, 2005. Black ink on black sugar paper. Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. Size not specified.

Christian Boltanski

Christian Boltanski is a late twentieth century artist, born in Paris in 1944. His oeuvre is both merry and morbid, fashioned from insubstantial materials such as light bulbs, biscuit tins, old clothes and flickering shadows. The art work bears ‘witness to Boltanski’s obsession with the objectification of life in death’. Boltanski was born to a Jewish family a few weeks after the liberation of Paris, however, his childhood was profoundly affected by the mass murders of Jews. His work is an attempt to deal with the Holocaust and

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28 Marchant, “Documenting the Diverse Western Australian Flora”, 7.
30 Gumpert, Christian Boltanski, 118.
31 Gumpert, Christian Boltanski, 97.
the ‘agonizing question of how such an atrocity, at odds with basic humanity, could have occurred’. 32

In his installation *Inventar* (1991) Boltanski employs rephotographed images of children from his infant school and exhibits them in simple tin frames. The only illumination in the gallery space is a series of light bulbs, which surround the photographs. In the semidarkness of the room, the golden light from the bulbs produces a dreamlike spectacle of the children with incandescent halos. The religious and sacred quality of the work is evident in the use of altars upon which several photographs are positioned. The carefully controlled use of light generates a feeling of reverence and encourages memories of night and day, life and death. These aspects of Boltanski’s work are similar to those that have informed my own use of lighting in my installation, where I too have used subdued lighting levels and directed pools of light onto the individual artworks.

![Figure 4-13. Christian Boltanski, *Inventar*, 1991. Photographs, light bulbs. Size not specified.](image)

In the piece *L’Ange d’alliance* (1986) Boltanski exploits shadows to suggest the presence of multiple souls, or ghostly ancestors. The winged figures are mysteriously obscure amongst the shadows which flicker with the candle light. In addition the rephotographed portraits of the children from Dijon are presented amongst the shadows of the ominous winged creature (see Figures 4-14 and 4-15).

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Boltanski’s use of shadows, and the movement of these shadows as the candle burns, has influenced my creative choices in my installation. The fabric in the wreaths of my work also moves gently with the air currents, creating a similar effect to that of candles. There is also a further connection between Boltanski’s art and that of my own. While Boltanski’s art generates ideas with the ‘perennial paradoxes that permeate both the future certainty of our death and the current uncertainly of our lives’, my work also announces the finality of extinction and the uncertainty and fragility of life around us.33

In this chapter I have investigated the work of five other artists whose intentions and techniques can be seen as having a relationship with, and influences on, my art. It is apparent in this selective survey that I share with others the desire to question the values of our society and to elicit critical reflection regarding human impact on the natural environment.

33 Gumpert, Christian Boltanski, 156.