

'Secret Garden'

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Text by Ashleigh Jones

'Secret Garden' is a compelling and challenging look at the relationship between humans and nature as existing on two sides of a knife. Beyond seeing humans as destroyers of worlds, 'Secret Garden' posits how our capacity to harm can sit side-side with the opportunity for hope and healing. Eight artists depict human entanglement with nature through fantastical and apocalyptic imagery, testifying to life on earth as living on a knife's edge between splendour and disaster.

It is difficult for us to fathom the devastating effects of global warming. Specific causes may be separated from their deleterious effects by distances and times so vast that they fall outside of the human frame of reference. **Emily Parsons-Lord's** 'When you cut into the present, the future leaks out' is installed into the gallery's wall with a disquieting honesty, suspending a point of revelation that the viewer cannot avoid. The revelation is that the globe is warming drastically at the hands of humans, even if these changes sit outside comprehension. Parsons-Lord's ephemeral installation positions gallium to leak out of a hole in the wall only when it reaches a temperate twenty-nine degrees. This activated-by-heat mercurial silver metal sits as a metaphor for the quicksilver state of our climate. Parsons-Lord has chosen gallium for its man-made nature, much like our environment with a human-made climate. This alchemical installation joins Parsons-Lord repertoire of works that engage with geoengineering in a nod to the geoengineering ideas that are being suggested to combat climate change. 'When you cut into the present, the future leaks out' asks the viewer to observe the current significant moment in the history of humans where we have the ability to affect the environment for good or for bad. In one hand, our development has polluted the skies and yet, in the other, such technological advancements could purify the heavens.

Though it is right to think of urban developments as polluters, we may one day need the infrastructure to accommodate our survival. Wavering between documentation and invention, premonition and the unknown, the surreal and the familiar, **Giacomo Costa's** digitally constructed worlds are like ruins from a lost civilisation. With a turn of time, they could be our future civilisation. Sitting at the crossroads of computer-generated images, architecture and science fiction, Costa's pulverised landscapes and anonymous buildings soar above human scale and speak of a profligate world. 'atmosfera no.17' is a digitally constructed barge apartment block floating on a foreboding black body of water. The block could be a social experiment of new nomadic micro-communities many years from now, surviving the deluge of rising sea levels. Has Costa seen into a future of environmental disaster that we cannot see? He puts forward alternative housing to survive the rising waters, and at the same time he highlights the adverse urban landscapes that have been the precursor to this new terrain.

Also like a barge floating on sea water, the half-lit, half-known and partially revealed 'Raft of The Medusa' is the subject of concealment in **John Beard's** black revisitation of Géricault's masterpiece. John Beard's 'THE RAFT – I' and 'THE RAFT – II' are photographic vignettes of his full-scale painting that replicates Géricault's monumental canvas in black monochrome. The pervasive animate darkness reveals the 1819 wreck

of a French frigate and desperate men clambering to stay afloat on a raft. Unmerciful and uncompromising in the depicted brutality, the desperation on canvas is as devastating as the rising sea waters slowly suffocating the coastlines of Papua New Guinea or the canals of Venice. Gericault and Beard's raft translates as the contrast between the dangers lurking in the rising sea and the hope of survival. Much like the men on this raft and current countries facing the harshest effects of rising sea waters, their fate is not yet determined: they might be rescued, or they might be engulfed by the merciless waters.

Underneath the water's surface, Bangerang artist **Peta Clancy** illuminates lost histories that speak to humans as both creators and destroyers, and of nature as a force of life and erasure. 'Fissures in Time' refocusses our attention on the man-made lakes in Dja Dja Wurrung country that flooded and concealed the burial site of the many Indigenous people massacred there. Clancy's photographic process of manual manipulation, printing the original photograph of the site and re-photographing it layered over the same site 'reveals scars' in the landscape. Clancy's photographs bring to light a temporal split which sits outside a conventional reading of the site, now a lake surrounded by a caravan park. Melissa Lucashenko, a European and Bandjalung writer, describes the experience of Australian Indigenous people looking at the land as having a double vision: "We see the world that white people see but we are also seeing a mythical landscape at the same time and an historical landscape."

Philip Wolfhagen's 'Three Part Invention no. 2' is attuned to the undercurrent feelings humans have with the landscape, depicting a sombre, atmospheric landscape of his home in the Midlands of Tasmania. The son of a Tasmanian woolgrower, Wolfhagen's deeply sensed relationship with the landscape exists between personal memory, place and feeling, which he surrenders to the canvas to facilitate a deeper awareness of ourselves in relation to the natural world. 'Three Part Invention no. 2' holds a message that our bodies' responses can read like the intuitive connections humans feel during the passages of changing weather. Though we share an intimate connection with Wolfhagen's landscapes, his land's geographies are cryptic, weathered, sclerophyllous, and laconic. They are old and evasive. You have to stay with them. There is an honesty amongst Wolfhagen's semi-abstracted palette knife, and we respond to this with a felt awareness that amongst life's beauties, life is also one of difficulties of loss and grief. And though the shifts of tonality, colour and horizon result in scenes that speak of hope and grief there are also intimate moments of optimism, life and light coming up from the horizon. 'Three Part Invention no. 2' is a fascinating study of how closely entangled to nature humans are, placing us in a vast cosmos ecosystem that nevertheless is an intimate joy to exist in.

"There is pleasure in the pathless woods, there is rapture on the lonely shore, there is society where none intrudes, by the deep sea and music in its roar..." the poet Lord Byron wrote. **Juz Kitson's** mysterious life forms appear to be simultaneously primordial and science-fiction. In an evolutionary arms race waged for millions of years, Kitson's creatures live in Byron's uninterrupted society. With the most advanced vertebrae and bodies lined with millions of tiny organs, Kitson's world is not as we know it. We have entered the twilight zone. As dioxide covers our sky and only the faintest vestige of sunlight remains, how does life survive? No longer reliant on vision, Kitson's creatures have forgone seeing for feeling, their bodies are lined with millions of receptors

sensitive to any movement. Though these creatures seem fantastical, there is the splendour of real life living unbeknownst to us and us to them.

Janet Laurence's 'Marie Antoinette Arbour' depicts the French monarch's unadorned *secret garden* awaiting the seasonal change that will transform it into a spectacle of spring. The weaving flowerless framework reveals the human hands of care and labour of the past arborists who created this supportive structure. The receding linear structure focusses our attention on a garden's transient space, its journey's completion resting firmly on the presence of blossoming life. By photographing this structure bare, Laurence poses the question *what can this garden be?* The viewer is beckoned to answer with something between imagination and false memory. Much like the arbour, Laurence's practice lives in the liminal zone between art, political responsibility and environmentalism. Her practice engages strong aesthetic elements that call to attention the beauty of nature to unlock environmental action in the viewer. "I'm wanting to create a vivid memory of these things but at the same time bring an intimacy of the situation to the viewer. I believe that if you make something repellent – which my subject is – no one will engage." Much like Marie Antoinette's arbour carefully formed the framework to support the coming spring bloom, it is up to us to nurture and care for our environment; a step that will reinforce and buttress the living state of nature.

In the absence of such buttresses that can frame and support plant growth, there is collapse. The collapse of a large and heavy dead tree trunk reveals humans as fallible arborists in **Lottie's Consalvo's** 'The Last Arborist'. In this video work, Lottie Consalvo grapples with the futility of attempting to reverse the inevitable. After Consalvo determinedly drags the dead tree through dense water and attempts to resurrect it, the trunk falls, depicting an inevitable impossibility and a dire warning of what can be lost when actions are left too little, too late. What is lost when action is delayed? How will we mourn for what we once had? As with Consalvo's paintings, 'An Entry To The Deep', 'The Entrance To The End' and 'When You Were Gone', to comprehend the loss of something so great is an unachievable task. Trying to pin a concrete meaning to such an ephemeral action is just as futile as planting a tree on a watery horizon.

Just as utopian and dystopian impulses can inhabit the same object, the human relationship with nature is twofold. Alternative housing that saves us from the deluge of rising sea waters takes the form of the very buildings that led us to environmental disaster. Primordial and mysterious life forms exist both in the depths of the dark deep sea and figments of science fiction imaginations. Each of the artists in 'Secret Garden' attest to the ambiguous communion between desire and threat, the beautiful and the grotesque, the simultaneous splendour and disaster of life on earth. As life's evolutionary processes grow and technological capabilities develop, we entangle ourselves deeper and darker within nature and lodge ourselves firmly with a knife that can harm and heal.