



Lines of Site

Finding the Sublime in Canberra

“I have planned a city not like any other city in the world... I have planned an ideal city, a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future.” —Walter Burley Griffin

I have always found it fascinating that when Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin designed Canberra in 1911–12, neither of them had ever been to Australia. While their ideal city was never fully realised, it has not stopped others from finding the sublime in Canberra. The natural beauty of the region has long held cultural and personal significance, for First Nations people through to the artists in this exhibition. The notion of the sublime in aesthetics refers to something that possesses a tangible or intangible greatness, and can also refer to an extraordinary sense of nobleness.

Lines of Site: Finding the Sublime in Canberra is an exhibition that explores both of these lines of enquiry. It draws together seven artists who each work in different media. Their practices are inspired by the unique qualities of the Canberra region. While the concept of the sublime is often associated with Enlightenment philosophy, its relevance endures. As someone who was born and raised here, I am fascinated by how it speaks to people in different ways. In my relatively short lifetime I have witnessed great changes to the city and in people's attitudes towards it. These have encouraged me to take a closer look and inspired this exhibition.

Federal politics is intertwined with many people's perceptions of Canberra; particularly those who do not live here. In 1962: *Be Spoken To* letterpress artist Caren Florance and poet Melinda Smith have created an intricate and playful artists' book that invites us to find the poetry in legislation. The book and accompanying sign texts re-voice and re-site the institutional language they encountered during a 2014 residency at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House. The project inspired Florance and Smith to 'find the beauty in the engine of politics' and challenge our preconceptions. By reworking statements made by politicians more than fifty years ago, we are reminded that not everything said in the houses of parliament is as transparent as we might be led to

believe; something emphasised by the inclusion of concrete poetry.

While Smith used her creative licence to manipulate Hansard, Florance developed a visual language to produce a witty and thought-provoking body of work that draws on the city's political history to explore the relationship between word and image, fact and faction, the inelegant and the sublime. References to John Smith Murdoch's distinct design of Old Parliament House (opened 1927) are used for the border of the book, anchoring it in a physical space. 1962 was selected as it appeared to be a particularly uneventful year in Australia's political life. This gave them room to reinterpret it through the archive of Hansard transcripts and newspaper archives, and craft a work that reminds us of the fact that we never understand the past as it truly was.

Florance spent part of her childhood in Canberra, where she was first introduced to the magic of the area. Later, she and Smith separately moved here from regional New South Wales to pursue tertiary education. Neither initially trained as artists—with Florance studying literature, and Smith law and Japanese—though both have established creative profiles here, as a leading graphic artist and poet respectively. Drawing on Florance's interest in social activism and Smith's legal background in the public service, they explore the city's political role in a way that defies expectations and encourages us to look into our history in order to understand the present, as one of their text installations (reproduced in the artist's book) states: 'The point of the present is not to be the past' but, one might add, to learn from it.

While Cathy Franzi's *View from Summit of Mount Ainslie* features a depiction of Old Parliament House, it is its surrounding landscape that she highlights. Growing up in Canberra, Franzi found its landscape and nearby national parks to be places for discovery and the imagination; her love of plants and the environment has never left her. She later enrolled in art school, where she went on to complete

a PhD, for which she developed a series of vessels with depictions of native plants. Concern for the natural world underscores her practice, as she cannot 'separate using plants as decoration from what is happening in the environment'.

This passion is carried into her work in *Lines of Site*. Franzi presents an experimental body of work inspired by her explorations of Canberra and its history. She has long admired Mahony Griffin's magnificent ink tree portraits and architectural renderings, including her designs for Canberra. This includes the *View from Summit of Mount Ainslie* (1911), the namesake for her series. Inspired by the American's art, she has explored its mystical and sublime elements through her ceramic practice. Using Limoges porcelain as her base, she incised a 360-degree view from each of the city's key peaks—Mount Ainslie, Red Hill and Black Mountain—and inlaid it with ceramic ink. She then applied a wash of underglaze colour to create a watercolour-like effect.

The circular form of Franzi's works is inspired by roundabouts, ubiquitous features of the city's urban landscape. For her, roundabouts anchor the urban and suburban areas. They are also a nod to the Griffins, as their design for Canberra was noted for its inclusion of circles, important symbols of the life cycle and wholeness. Here Franzi encourages viewers to walk around and peer inside her hollow vessels, where they will find impressions of leaves collected atop each summit. These surprising and striking artworks are a reminder that even the most unlikely of urban markers can be home to distinct natural wonders.

Photographer Mark Mohell has produced several series that form an extended study of Canberra. Born here to Finnish migrants, Mohell has a deep attachment to his hometown. This is expressed through quiet observations of the area, including his exploration of how we cultivate 'natural' environments in suburbia. Interested in how we engage with the places where we live, he hopes to encourage viewers to look more closely at their surroundings.

Inspired by botanical illustrations, Mohell's work in *Lines of Site* consists of digital prints and video works in which he documents plant specimens found at various sites across Canberra. The delicate black and white images against a blank background seem more like portraits than images of plants. His reverence for each specimen is conveyed through the rich tonal quality of the images. The inclusion of colour in the video works adds a contrast to the

prints, which is reinforced by the fact the specimens rotate and float in space. When I look at Mohell's work it seems as though each subject has its own personality, accentuated by its removal from its native habitat.

Mohell's study of Canberra includes both the urban and natural environments. He has selected specimens of some of the small and in some cases unassuming plants that grow in each area. There is a meditative quality that demonstrates his close affinity with the region, as he explains: 'I want to explore the elements, which we use to create our place of refuge, the break between our public and private lives'. Language plays an important role in his work through his combination of binomial nomenclature—the scientific names that are generally drawn from Latin—with place names related to the site where each specimen was collected; such as *Banksia 02 (Parkes)*. By combining place names with botanical labels, Mohell grounds the series in his experience of the area.

The vigour of Canberra winters were a shock to Annika Harding when she moved here to undertake tertiary studies more than a decade ago. She grew up in Queensland and the United States of America and has always been fascinated by landscapes. She is particularly interested in what humans do in—and to—the landscape. Harding stills finds herself discovering new areas in this region that possess sublime qualities and inspire her work as a painter, writer and curator. Her recent encounter with the pine forests of the Cotter River area was a catalyst for her latest work.

Harding's engagement with the sublime draws on Romanticism. Casper David Friedrich's iconic paintings *Wanderer Above the Sea Fog* (1818) and *Early Snow* (c. 1828), are clear reference points in her artworks in *Lines of Site*. An example is her painting *Holzweg 3 (with rückenfigur)*, in which she depicts a figure from behind, walking along one of two dirt tracks in a dense pine forest. In German the word 'holzweg' means both a timber track and the notion of being on the wrong track, and these two meanings are suggested by the imagery in the work. Harding explains that this figure seen from behind is known in German as a 'rückenfigur'. His inclusion in the painting suggests interaction between humans and the forest, yet his surroundings have a much larger presence than himself. Fog obscures his body, suggesting an atmosphere of mystery. This is emphasised by the inclusion of transparent layers of colour that contrast with more detailed sections of the painting. Is he peacefully exploring the area, or is he lost in the woods?

In this body of work, Harding draws on the Romantic tradition and locates it in her Canberra reality. The dense fog that pervades Canberra mornings during winter months has a striking presence in her depictions of the forests around the Cotter. As she explains 'All roads look the same and there are no markers visible beyond the pines to locate yourself'. The plywood surface is visible under the acrylic paintings. For her this links these strange, sublime forests with the industrial products that come from them.

Kirstie Rea also ventures into rugged areas around Canberra. The capital region has always been her home and greatest source of inspiration. She possesses a 'love of places beyond city boundaries' and enjoys the easy access to rural and remote areas that Canberra provides. The world-renowned glass artist's unquestionable mastery of her medium is seen in the way she creates floating glass sculptures that echo the flux and flow of nature.

Her installation *Drawing on the west* marks a continuation of her interest in human interaction with the land. She combines a humble garden rake—a frequent motif in her art—with coloured sheer glass, wool and wall drawing to create a site-specific work that celebrates the beautiful Brindabella Range to the city's west. The solid yet fragile qualities of glass echoes the impermanence of these vistas. The role of the Brindabellas in historic surveys of the area that determined the border of Canberra is also something that interests Rea; the drawn plumb bob to the far right of the work acknowledges this.

For Rea, the rake symbolises the act of creating Canberra's parks and gardens. It reminds us of the physical work involved in cultivating and maintaining the bush capital. This connects with the area's history, as horticulturalist Charles Weston was engaged early in the process of planning Canberra, and oversaw the development of its urban landscape. The way she has transformed this unassuming object into a captivating artwork attests to her ability to express her experiences of the sublime in her hometown.

Like Rea, Jacqueline Bradley has lived in Canberra since she was born. The outdoors has also served as a source of inspiration and unease throughout her life and artistic career. Her autobiographical practices examines this tension and has a distinct feminist angle expressed through playful and poetic sculptures that take the form of wearable art.

In *Nightfall* she explores the beauty and vulnerability of Canberra at night. A eucalypt branch found by the road in Tuggeranong—seemingly hacked off and abandoned—has been transformed into an ethereal piece through the addition of fabric and shoes. A length of midnight blue velvet cloaks the branch and appears like a garment caught in a branch. Upon closer inspection light blue fabric is visible underneath, signifying that daylight has been smothered by the darkness of night. A form resembling high-heeled shoes is visible within the length of fabric. Do these belong to someone who has been trapped under the branch, or has she shed a part of herself in the cover of night?

Bradley feels that 'experiences are located in site', meaning that Canberra is deeply linked to her practice. She only makes art about places she had been to and experienced, and this piece is no exception. Forming part of a larger body of work she is developing towards a PhD in sculpture, this piece has a poetic quality that connects with a wider exploration of human engagement with the environment. It makes me recall the scene in Peter Weir's film adaptation of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) when a piece of lace from Miranda's dress is found in the bush, presumably torn off by a branch. Here too the soft, feminine fabric seems out of place with the branch it has become entangled with. *Nightfall* captures the conflicting feelings pleasure and unease that some of us experience when exploring the bush around Canberra.

It must be said that the title of this exhibition—*Lines of Site: Finding the Sublime*—is somewhat misleading. As the exhibiting artists have shown through their eclectic artworks, there is no such thing as the sublime in Canberra, but, rather, it is something that takes many forms. For some it is a spiritual quality experienced on top of the region's mountains, or through foraging at different times of the day and night, while for others it has roots in its history, built environment and suburban areas. What is clear is that the definition of the sublime varies for different people, and it is not always found where you might expect. Art is an important means of opening our awareness to the awesome qualities of our surroundings. Developing this exhibition has reminded me of something Rosalie Gascoigne—one of the greatest artists to have called Canberra home—once observed: 'artists should sing songs of their district'. While her experience of the sublime in Canberra and that of each artist in this exhibition might not be the same as yours, its presence is undeniable.

Grace Blakeley-Carroll
Exhibition curator

List of Works

Jacqueline Bradley

Nightfall 2017
cotton velvet, eucalypt branch, shoes,
cotton, linen
62 x 120 x 340 cm

Cathy Franzi

View from Summit of Black Mountain 2017
porcelain
9.4 (h) x 32.6 (d) cm
View from Summit of Red Hill 2017
porcelain
9.1 (h) x 26.7 (d) cm
View from Summit of Mount Ainslie 2017
porcelain
10.2 (h) x 30.7 (d) cm

Annika Harding

Holzweg 1 2017
acrylic on plywood board
20.5 x 25.5 cm
Holzweg 2 2017
acrylic on plywood board
20.5 x 25.5 cm
Holzweg 3 (with rückenfigur) 2017
acrylic on plywood board
20.5 x 25.5 cm
Holzweg 4 2017
acrylic on plywood board
20.5 x 25.5 cm
Holzweg 5 2017
acrylic on plywood board
20.5 x 25.5 cm
Broken branch 2017
acrylic on plywood board
20.5 x 25.5 cm
Clearing 1 2017
acrylic on plywood board
41 x 51cm
Holzweg glimpses 2017
acrylic on plywood board
41 x 51 cm
Trash (VB) 2017
acrylic on plywood board
41 x 51 cm
Trash (Timber products) 2017
acrylic on plywood board
41 x 51 cm
Clearing 2 2017
acrylic and spray paint on plywood board
81 x 122 cm
Clearing 3 (with rückenfigur) 2017
acrylic and spray paint on plywood board
81 x 122 cm

Mark Mohell

Eucalyptus 01 (Fyshwick) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 cm
Conifer 01 (Narrabundah) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 cm
Banksia 01 (Parkes) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 cm
Callistemon 01 (Griffith) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 cm
Banksia 02 (Parkes) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 mm
Casuarina 01 (Red Hill) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 cm
Acacia 01 (Red Hill) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 cm
Eucalyptus 02 (O'Connor) 2017
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 60 x 90 cm
*Screen 1: Eucalyptus 13 (Fyshwick), Banksia 01 (Parkes),
Conifer 03 (Griffith), Eucalyptus 11 (O'Connor)* 2017
digital video
duration 08:18 minutes
*Screen 2: Eucalyptus 01 (Fyshwick), Cassinia 01
(O'Connor), Banksia 03 (Parkes), Acacia 02 (O'Connor)*
2017
digital video
duration 07:34 minutes
*Screen 3: Eucalyptus 09 (Griffith), Eucalyptus 03
(Black Mountain), Acacia 01 (Red Hill), Eucalyptus 02
(O'Connor)* 2017
digital video
duration 07:27 minutes

Kirstie Rea

Drawing on the west 2017
rake, glass, wool and drawing
180 x 400 x 7 cm

Caren Florance and Melinda Smith

Be Spoken To 2014
letterpress and embossing powder, perspex
(8 x c. A3 works originally installed on the faces
of MoAD vintage signs), dimensions variable
1962: Be Spoken To 2014–17
letterpress and screenprint on Magnani Avoria
Vergata paper, 2 parts, handsewn in archival Tyvek
'ghost bag', edition of 5, 505 x 357 x 14 cm, 8pp + 48pp
Thanks for the loan of the furniture to Kirstie Rea
(ex-government desk) Juliet Ward (Fred Ward chair).

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