

ESSAYS ON
earth

BRODIE ELLIS, PAUL KANE
AND JOHN WOLSELEY

Essays on Earth brings together the work of three leading artists of the Bendigo region, uniting their shared concerns and care for the natural world in a rich collaboration across artforms. Over three gallery spaces Brodie Ellis and John Wolseley's focussed studies of distinct habitats, organic forms and interspecies relationships are arranged in dialogue with the elemental themes and poetic reflections of Paul Kane's recent series of 'verse essays', titled *Earth, Air, Water, Fire* (2022).

Capturing the pulse of vibrant and sprawling ecosystems in diverse landscapes across Australia, Wolseley's large-scale paintings and woodcut prints are populated with plants and animals, carbon traces and geological rubbings. Ellis' sculptural field studies, cast in bronze and impressed into clay, reveal a hybrid taxonomy of flow forms and other natural phenomena alongside digitally hand-coloured photographic experiments in botanical and mineral microscopy created using advanced imaging technologies. Employing a combination of scientific processes and artistic exploration, each artist immerses themselves in the landscape, engaging with materials that embody the energies and stories of their chosen sites.

At the heart of the exhibition is a large-scale moving image installation combining the work of all three artists in a meditative flow of image, poetry, and sound. This epic work illuminates and informs the selection of works across the broader exhibition, embodying the artists' collaboration and the spirit of Ekphrasis that underpins the exhibition. In a contemporary re-visioning of this generative literary tradition - where a poem or prose vividly brings to life a work of art - new and existing works, are brought into conversation through proximation, to stimulate new perspectives and ways of seeing and being in the world.

Note: View the artwork image by clicking the artwork title. With the exception of *Dadiga Guṇḍirr* and *Essays on Earth*, multichannel video installation.

Mulkuṅ Wirrpanda

Dhudi-Djapu clan of Dhuruputjpi
born 1947, died 2021

Daḍiga Guṅdirr

2019

earth pigments on stringy bark

Collection of John Wolseley

Mrs M Wirrpanda was a senior artist and Elder of the Dhudi-Djapu clan from Dhuruputjpi in Eastern Arnhem Land. A weaver, carver, printmaker, and painter of sacred designs and later, of edible plants, traditional bush foods, and the delicate land and water ecosystems of Yolṅgu country. Mrs Wirrpanda and fellow artist John Wolseley met in 2010, commencing a close friendship and profound artistic collaboration which spanned more than a decade.

In this painting, Mrs Wirrpanda represents the wedge-shaped termite mounds of her Country and their frequent inhabitants, ṅaḍi (*Iridomyrmex sanguineus*, or meat ants), who are symbiotic partners of the mounds' makers, munyukulunju (*Amitermes meridionalis*, commonly known as magnetic or compass termites). Daḍi hold sacred significance for Mrs Wirrpanda, for whom they are a clan talisman. She also makes reference to her and her fellow women's practice of using fragments of termite mounds to keep warm the gundirr (ground oven) built to cook yams at harvest time.

This painting illustrates Mrs Wirrpanda's exceptional knowledge of Country; the relationship between the blind, herbivorous termites and carnivorous, hunting meat ants, offers a powerful reflection on the interconnectedness of life and regenerative potential of collaboration.

Cultural note: Mrs Wirrpanda passed away in 2021 and her name is used here in accordance with cultural protocol. Mrs Wirrpanda is referred to by her first name in personal stories shared by John Wolseley inside the exhibition.

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Flow Form 4 (Black River)

2023

ceramic, reclaimed wood and chalk pigments

Courtesy of the artist

Xylem and phloem are the main components of the vascular system of plants, transporting nutrients and water from the roots to the leaves and back again. Over time the ebb and flow of this dynamic network forges patterns or 'flow forms' into the structure of the plant. Flow forms occur across the natural world, created by the movement of life-giving fluids and air. These flow dynamics are also echoed in the cellular structure and systems of the human body.

These delicate studies reveal flow forms in fallen trees at Leanganook (Mount Alexander) near Castlemaine, which have broken open to reveal the process of their growth. Working in the field and with specimens brought to her studio, Brodie Ellis has made direct impressions with clay, pressing and folding it into and over the trees' surfaces. The sculptural forms are laid out here in a fragmented flow, evoking a river, or skeleton. In an act of reverence and care, Ellis fixes a moment in the life cycle of the trees, which will eventually decay and regenerate the earth, transforming them into allegorical relics.

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

The life of inland waters - Durabudboi river

2015–18

watercolour, graphite, woodcut on paper

Private Collection

‘In this painting, I have drawn the web of fish and aquatic plants and currents of water far inland at the headwaters of the floodplain. The way the plants, sometimes in serried lines or groups or undulating mats, are woven into the currents of water reminded me of flocks of different birds in a stormy sky. Some are moored to the bed of the stream while others, such as the carnivorous bladderworts, swim about freely waving their bladder-like traps in the current. There are several species of Bladderwort here; a carnivorous plant which has evolved its leaves so they are a network of free-standing veins with little traps attached to them which ‘eat’ small organisms like rotifer and diatoms. By getting their nutrients this way, they have dispensed with the need to have roots.

The serpentine stems of various water lilies flow out and then contract when the water recedes in the dry season. Among the other plants I have also drawn – Water chestnuts, Triglochin dubium, Duck weed, Spirodela Polyniza, two different species of Nymphaea lily and one of Nymphoides lily. Within the stems of the lilies, there lurk Archer fish waiting to shoot their jets of water at unsuspecting insects resting on the foliate above the water.’

– John Wolseley

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

Beetles in the salt - Lake Tyrell

2014–18

watercolour and etching on paper

Private Collection

‘I was walking round Lake Tyrell looking for birds with the late satirist and writer John Clarke. He was riffing on the names given to the Crimson Chat (also known as the Saltbush Canary) when we stumbled across these insects lying on the salt. Later I used some of the photos he took of them to make an etching, and then this large watercolour.

Returning a few months later I laid out three big sheets of Fabriano paper on the edge of the lake, and as I often do, I splashed big pools of watercolour on them and left them to dry. Late afternoon a warm wind came up and I noticed on the horizon a rust-coloured cloud erupting into the air and darkening the sky over the lake. The pulse of the wind grew stronger as if emanating from the core of the fire; and it carried embers and burning branches like dismembered limbs. I looked down on the papers and saw that the pools of colour were drying in delicious curdly blotches and scabs and seemed to be mimicking the surface of the salt lake. John Clarke remarked how the way the mineral and rather bilious emanations appearing on the surface of the lake made him think of intestines; and that there before us was the stomach of some great ruminant animal. In the last rays of a weak sun I could see the smoke and ash and flying embers floating down on the intestinal waters of the lake; and then to my delight there landed several beetles and a singed moth which like a miniature Icarus dived into my stygian watercolour.’

– John Wolseley

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

Distant glimpses of the great floodplain seen through a veil of trees and hanging vines

2017

watercolour, graphite and colour pencil, ink, oil
paint, dry pastel, abrasions, scratching out
and nature printing with collages of frottage,
wood relief, linocut and intaglio printed
Japanese tissue papers on woven paper

On loan from the National Museum of Australia

This panoramic scroll painting was one of the central works in the exhibition - *Midawarr/Harvest: The Art of Mulkuṅ Wirrpanda and John Wolseley*, which was shown at the National Museum of Australia 2017–2019. The exhibition was the culmination of an extraordinary friendship between two of Australia's most distinguished senior artists, celebrating their shared obsession with traditional Yolṅu plant use. In 2009, Mulkuṅ adopted Wolseley as her Wawa (brother) and in the following years they harvested and painted over 40 species of edible plants.

The exhibition featured this specially commissioned vast painting of a floodplain by Wolseley, alongside 80 bark paintings and painted poles by Mulkuṅ of Yolṅu plants and their fruits and tubers. The late Mulkuṅ Wirrpanda was passionate about passing on her knowledge of these plants to a younger generation to counteract their dependence on junk food. Wolseley's immersive landscape portrays a distant floodplain and features the same plants and trees which Mulkuṅ painted.

Wolseley notes, 'I have tried to find a way in which a painter from another culture could make a work about a site of power and sacred importance and do so with reticence and reverence. Over the years I have drawn the distant floodplain of Garranali through the trees and hanging vines on the edge of the rainforest. I have painted the land at one remove, as seen through a veil.'

'In June 2009 I was standing with a group of artists on the edge of the great floodplain of Garaṇarri. We were looking through a jungly frieze of rainforest trees hung with trailing vines and all manner of climbing plants. In the hazy distance we could see where the monsoon rains had left pools and flood debris. Further away were the dim ovals of middens and the dark voluminous shapes of the sacred rripi or banyan trees.

Further upstream were the lands of the Madarrpa clan where the ancestor Barama had emerged and distributed the law, sacred clan designs and ritual objects. Great artists such as Gunybi Ganambarr, Nongirrṇa Marawili, Mulkuṇ Wirrpanda and Djambawa Marawili are from there and the Yolṇu traditions and ritual observances of their land strongly continue.

It was Djambawa who had brought us here to the edge of the floodplain, and who now recounted some of these stories. He told us how in the dawn of creation a number of ancestor women had come from the coast and were moving up the floodplain. Where they dug for edible roots there had burst forth springs of fresh water which are still running. As he was singing this story he told how, as the sun rose up over the dark earth, these ancestor figures turned into brolga cranes. He gestured toward the distant source of the floodplain, and as his arm moved across it a great stream of cranes flew slowly and majestically towards the sea.

In this painting I have sought to describe that moment in time. I have drawn onto the long scroll of paper the brolgas as they flew down the floodplain behind the screen of trees and vines.'

– John Wolseley

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

Dhunguruk Butjuwutju/Mona and Djitama - edible tubers of East Arnhem Land

2015–18

woodcut from King Billy Pine and watercolour
on paper

Courtesy of the artist

‘For this work, I have tried to make my own distillations of the idea of Gaia. In *Dunguruk, Butjuwutju/Mona* this has taken the form of several plants and their yams and tubers engraved into a woodblock matrix of King Billy Pine.

The *Dioscorea transversa* yam was named after Dioscorides, the first herbalist and father of pharmacy. The yams rest within the pine grain, and as I engrave them they seem to be like little earths – underground miniature aquifers of carbohydrate. Within them I found tunnels of beetle grubs - *langurk*, eating the yams from the inside out. Langurk being the name which Mulkuṅ my Yapa (sister) had given me.’

– John Wolseley

‘The leaves are thin and long and stand up in bunches of four or five. The food is long and made up of cylinder-like bunches that are dug up or pulled out. It is then pounded by clapsticks to make soft for eating.’

– Mulkuṅ Wirrpanda

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

Termitaria: Indwelling II – The eusocial life of arboreal termite nests with pardalotes and golden shouldered parrots

2020–21

woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage
and watercolour on cotton, Mino washi and
Gampi paper

Woodblock printer: Kaitlyn Gibson

Courtesy of the artist

‘In 2019, when looking for plants near Gangan (East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory) with my late Yapa (sister) Mulkuṅ Wirrpanda, I found a huge termite mound which had collapsed, revealing what looked like a ruined city with all its halls, galleries and linking passageways exposed. I could see the nursery apartments, the fungus gardens, and even what could have been the royal cell where the queen had lived with her diminutive king.

As I looked down on this collapsed ‘termitaria’ I was amazed to find evidence of what Yapa had told me – of how various insects, birds and other creatures living in these mounds in a naturally beneficial way. I could see feathers of djutuduman quivering in the wind. This is the striated pardalote, the small bird who choose as a favoured nesting site. Later, I was also to discover that there was a symbiotic relationship between a moth (*trisyntopa* sp), golden – shouldered parrot, and termites.’

– John Wolseley

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

Termitaria: Indwelling III – Tree wood termite mound with forest kingfisher 2020–21

woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage
and watercolour on cotton, Mino washi and
Gampi paper

Woodblock printer: Kaitlyn Gibson

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Flow Form 3 (Black Amphibian)

2022–23

ceramic and chalk pigments

Courtesy of the artist

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

Large refugia with new growth - Murray Sunset country

2008

carbonized wood, watercolour and graphite
on paper

Mildura Arts Centre Collection, acquired 2009

'In early 2007, I set up camp a few kilometres west of Sunset Track in the Murray Sunset National Park in Victoria's North-west. The sand hill plains had been burnt twice in the previous two years and the branches of burnt Mallee stems formed a black calligraphy on the pure white sand.

The site where I made this work was an unburnt wedge of ground which had mostly escaped the fire. It had become a kind of refugia – an island of rich biodiversity. I love drawing these kinds of places. They are one of those sites which provide an important ecological haven. For me they provide a rich metaphor for exploring ideas of renewal and regeneration. This patch of ground with its Mallee clumps and Callitris pines above an under-storey of flowering shrubs was a living memory of the landscape around it. The flora and fauna which survived the inferno would soon re-colonize the sand hills.

At this time, I had been inventing new ways of drawing. Rather than holding and moving the charcoal over a fixed piece of paper in the conventional way, I moved the paper against the charcoal rubbing and waving it against the branches and stems of the burnt trees and shrubs. To make this work I moved a large sheet of Arches paper through the trees. I held one end and the paper furled and uncurled against a Hakea bush whose black twigs inscribed it; and then the drawing quivered to a pause. I let it rest over the tree where it was more gently scribbled on.

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– John Wolseley

Brodie Ellis

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Sky Ladder

2022

giclee print

Courtesy of the artist

John Wolseley

born 1938, England, arrived Australia 1978.
Lives and works in the Whipstick Forest,
Bendigo

Termitaria: Indwelling I – Interior of an Arnhem land termite mound with fungus gardens, nursery galleries and the royal cell

2020–21

woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage
and watercolour on cotton, Mino washi and
Gampi paper

Woodblock printer: Kaitlyn Gibson

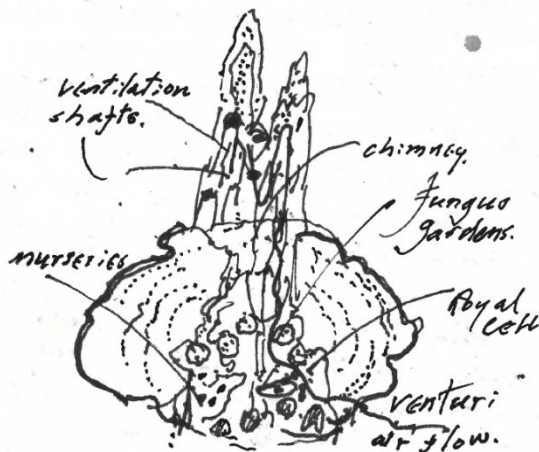
Courtesy of the artist

‘This work was made I made in 2019 when I was researching the magnetic termite mounds of East Arnhem land. I have tried to reveal what happens in the different spaces and compartments of these amazing architectural masterpieces. I've drawn the fungus gardens, and the nursery galleries and described the Royal cell where lives the Queen. The design of these vertical termite mounds incorporates various systems of ventilation and the circulation of air. I was able to study these when looking at a giant mound which had fallen over on the savannah plains. I could draw the collapsed shafts and chimneys of these ventilation systems, whose principles of fluid mechanics were elucidated long ago by Archimedes, and which have been incorporated into buildings by some of the world's great architects.

This baroque art work is composed of different layers of collaged paper - woodcuts, linocuts and watercolour. The under layer is a large linocut which is a schematic drawing of a section of a large termite mound. Within this drawing I have conflated various diagrammatic representations of the inner workings of termitaria which I have pinched from scientific journals. I inked up one vertical plank of huon pine, and another slab cut from the trunk of an 1800 year old King billy pine and then printed them on to big sheets of Gampi paper.

I like the way that the vertical slab growing upwards represents the accretion of growth through time, while the circular cross section of the tree trunk images cyclic time. Thus these two modes of understanding time could embody as Stephen Jay Gould put it – ‘the deepest and oldest themes in Western thought about the central subject of time: linear and circular visions, or time’s arrow and time’s cycle.’

– John Wolseley



Reproduction of page from John Wolseley's sketchbook

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Constellation (Red)

2022

giclee print

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works
on Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Constellation (Blue)

2022

giclee print

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works
on Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Phase Shift

2022

giclee print

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works
on Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Meteor Vein

2023

giclee print

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Gravity Wave

2023

giclee print

Courtesy of the artist

This suite of photographs was made with advanced imaging technologies at Monash University, primarily used for medical research. Working closely with resident microscopist Cameron Nowell, Brodie Ellis has explored the artistic potential of these innovative machines to create experimental images that illuminate the subtle beauty of organic forms including seed pods, feathers, sand, and rock. These tiny specimens from local habitats are collected and enlarged to create images that are guided by what is revealed through the microscope as laser light is refracted off the varied surfaces.

Each image is meticulously hand-coloured by Ellis within a digital environment to reveal specific features. The resulting compositions distil the flow of energy present in nature, drawing attention to minute details within vast interconnected networks and amplifying their presence to explore new ways of perceiving the natural world. Here, a tiny sliver of quartz from Leanganook (Mt Alexander) glows under the microscope, conjuring cosmic connections and bearing markings of its creation millions of years ago when volcanic magma cooled and crystallised.

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

MaxQ-3

(maquette for Chengdu Commission)

2019

oil on bronze, brass

Courtesy of the artist

Max Q is shorthand for maximum dynamic pressure, a crucial moment during the launch of a spacecraft when it encounters the most intense resistance as it pushes through the Earth's atmosphere on its journey into space. Max Q is the moment when rockets are statistically more likely to fail and explode. Space exploration persists as the ultimate 'new frontier' of scientific endeavour. Entrepreneurs, private companies, and government agencies jostle to travel higher and further in pursuit of new discoveries and alternatives for humanity's survival beyond Earth.

This small rocket-like sculpture is cast from the core of a native mistletoe - a parasitic plant that depends on other plants for its existence. Considered a blight by some, the mistletoe draws sustenance from its host plant. It also photosynthesises, creating its own food and provides shelter for a diversity of bird life, and is now considered a keystone species.

By casting the specimen in bronze, Brodie Ellis gives it physical weight and value, underscoring the possibilities of collaboration and better ways of working with resources on Earth rather than beyond it. While interested in the potential of intergalactic travel and scientific exploration, through her Max Q series Ellis questions the pursuit of technological progress at the expense of the environment and unsustainable use of finite resources.

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

MaxQ-2

2019

oil on bronze

Courtesy of the artist

MaxQ-1

2019

oil on bronze

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Flow Form 1 (White Wavelets)

2023

ceramic and chalk pigments

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis

born 1979, Lismore. Lives and works on
Djaara Country, Castlemaine

Flow Form 2 (White Vortex)

2023

ceramic, reclaimed wood and chalk pigments

Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis, John Wolseley and Paul Kane

Essays on Earth

2022–23

three-channel HD video, sound

Duration 2.5 hours

Composition and sound design: Peter Knight

Essays on Earth

The multichannel video installation *Essays on Earth* in the adjoining gallery is a fusion of image, poetry, and sound. It combines the work of all three artists in an immersive meditation conjuring vast and complex ecologies, dynamic energies, and elemental forces, in a comprehensive reflection on human relationships with the natural world.

Unfolding like a scroll, a flow of discrete slices of John Wolseley's expansive paintings are juxtaposed with the micro detail of Brodie Ellis' luminous experimental microscopy. Drawn from the artists' recent works, the images have been carefully composed to amplify ideas and sensations in dialogue with Paul Kane's reading of his long form poem titled *Earth, Air, Water, Fire* (2022).

This is a durational moving image work presented in five verses connected by a soundscape. Each verse reflects on an element in the following order – Earth, Air, Water, Fire, Aether. The work can be experienced in its entirety or in parts. You are welcome to come and go from the space or settle in for the full contemplative experience.

The duration of each verse is approximately 30 minutes. The full cycle is approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Directed and edited by Brodie Ellis
Composition and sound design by Peter Knight
Field recordings by Brodie Ellis & Cameron Robbins
Score recorded by Peter Knight and Jem Savage
Mixed by Peter Knight

Score performed by:
Peter Knight - trumpet, organ, electronics
Rachael Kim - violin
Katherine Philp - cello
Jacques Emery - bass

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