

nature interrupted

Contemporary Australian sculpture

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland
Sunday 13 March – Sunday 10 April 2011

In early 2011, we have experienced, in Australia and New Zealand, a series of extraordinary natural disasters and unprecedented weather events that have demonstrated, once again, how humanity is subject to the intransigent power of nature. We are all left in awe of the natural world, even as we seek to dominate it.

In the last decade, much contemporary art has been preoccupied with the realities and the fictions of the natural world, and the uncharted territories within which humanity has pursued its genetic, scientific, industrial explorations. It is a reflection of the concern that exists in broader society, the trepidation about where scientific experimentation might take us, and how 'natural' the objects we create can be.

Nature Interrupted takes the moment of challenge to the natural in the known physical world, and examines it through sculpture by artists whose practice has a contemporary focus on botanical anomalies, pseudo-natural forms, imaginary futures and the uncanny within the familiar. These works expand what the natural is or may be, combining two or more characteristics of a known organism, and together they explore environmental and climatic concerns, metamorphosis, evolution and the fantastic in imaginary worlds. They exploit the intrigue and the frisson of shock, horror, or revulsion experienced when the natural and historical contexts become changed.

The science of evolution was a defining paradigm that has, since the mid-19th century, shifted humanity's view of our place in the world. In a small way, the three-dimensional work in this exhibition allows an aesthetic reimagining of our possible futures. The realities of what may be in store for humanity are in the realm of science fiction, but these sculptural works, made by hand, whether visibly crafted like Carmel Wallace's *Cocoons* or slickly machined like Sebastian Di Mauro's *Cirrus suite*, may stimulate the imagination, or simply facilitate a journey toward acceptance of the changing climate in which we live.

Sebastian Di Mauro's interests have seen him develop oversized natural and architectural forms surfaced in artificial grass (Astroturf). These explorations of humanity's controlling impulse within the natural world incorporate witty observations of Australian cultural mores, dally with formal gardening practices like topiary (from Europe), and point to the lawn-mowing obsession visible every weekend in our suburbs. Both *Surge* and *Nap* are from Di Mauro's *Turf Sweet* series. Combining the unreal greenness of Astroturf with artificially large mutations of organic forms, a spiral exists like an overlarge flower in *Surge*. *Nap* evokes a tongue, a penis, but together they become an unholy union like nothing seen in nature. In his *Cirrus suite* works, smooth crescent-shaped objects link symbiotically together – backs ridged like grubs, they are highly polished with reflective two tone surfaces like cars – a patina evocative of a hybrid of the natural and the man made into a new kind of mutant form.

Simone Eisler's decorated animal horns, tusks, and bones are reliquaries of both past and future evolutionary transformations. While her work is ostensibly concerned with the connections between animals and humans and a shared past, she described the garden as, 'a site for transformation and enchantment – a place to reconnect and re-engage people with the creative forces of nature and the imagination'. *Memento* incorporates the joys of regeneration, the inevitability of death, and a primal and visceral connection (in its bony protuberances) between humanity and nature. A goat skull, encrusted with shells, bound with fabric, and reworked gives death new life – a strange reincarnation that is as joyous as it is sombre.

For Janet Laurence, nature has long been an inspiration and stimulus. During the installation of her medicinal garden for ailing plants at last year's *Biennale of Sydney: The Beauty of Distance*, Laurence donned a white coat and laboratory glasses and worked within a glasshouse structure to physically tend fragile plants. Her interest in threatened environments invokes science, environmental issues and the need for increased human care of flora and fauna. Her *Requiem (fight or flight)* shows plants under plastic, their organic qualities enlarged, overlaid and interspliced to create moody patterns, shadowy light and layers of possible change. This series of works has a moody beauty and melancholy evoked by the decay it heralds, records and celebrates.

Vera Möller's *pooletta* is in some ways amongst the most traditionally finessed of the objects in this exhibition. Made from air-drying clay and painstakingly hand-painted in colour and polka dot pattern, curly tendrils of hair sprout from many of the stems like mutant coral, aping and extending the possibilities in nature. Trained initially as a biologist, Möller suggested, 'I just love the fact that there is still at least half, if not more, of nature that is undiscovered and most of it in its very character is more alien than anything we can dream up.'

This 'truth is stranger than fiction' sentiment is also a dominant thread in Carmel Wallace's *Cocoons*. Inspired by natural elements she finds walking the beaches in southern Victoria, they sport high colour and organic characteristics not unusual in sea creatures – yet are crafted from highly processed materials such as cable ties and fishing ropes. While Wallace is interested in environmental activism, her *Cocoons* imagine a new natural environment, borne of artifice, exploring the conundrum of the human creation of the manmade natural.

Anna-Maria O'Keeffe's work is, like Wallace's, concerned with human interaction with the environment, but has a strong apocalyptic flavour. In *Ark*, a chunk of earth suspended from the ceiling, as though flung from the past or a dystopian future. Its dislocation is not fatal – moss-like greenery suggests that recovery, or a new future, is possible from an atrophied or diseased past – just as Noah's ark envisioned the possibility of starting anew.

Kathy Temin's *Overgrown sideboard garden* uses modern, non-art materials (like synthetic fur) to create an internal garden. While invented, mushroom-like objects sprout from a timber mantelpiece like trophies, it is suggestive of consumption, fetishistic memory (conjured by the kitsch materials), and a sense that humanity needs objects and their requisite experiences for comfort. Yet the white sterility of this series is sinister, and Temin is also responding to the memories in her own past as the descendant of Holocaust survivors. And there are historical references to modernism and minimalism. This work is imbued with her recent personal experience of visiting contemporary Warsaw, and the contemporary landscapes that overlay the trauma of the city's past.

New still life is also concerned with the sinister edge of consumerism, yet in this case Sarah Newall recreates an environment to stimulate the reclamation of individual power over mass marketing. Three boxes sit above a shelving unit. Each contains flowers in a sterile environment, with a background of dots forming a grid. This removal of a natural object from its native environment and its reinstatement in a highly controlled interior speaks to the capture of flora within humanity's freeze-frame. The perspex boxes, the grid behind, become prisons for the flowers – yet displayed within the trappings of humanity's need to consume, they are given context and a different future.

Caroline Rothwell's sculptural works also explore relationships developing between humans and the natural environment. *Hover* has a high gloss surface, evocative of slippery bodily fluid. Yet within it, an organic trunk-like core extends into a cage, above which flora and fauna connect in a highly unnatural combination of natural forms. These fictional essays into the possibilities of nature are drawn from her research into archives from the first contact of the European colonizers to Australia, the strangeness they encountered, and their need to record the unreality (for them) of the natural in this new land.

The work of each of these artists seeks to plumb the depths of our relationships with the botanical and the organic. At a fundamental level, humanity is exploring the developing meanings of what the natural might be. There is an essential conundrum – in that if humanity can and may create new life forms, what is natural anyway? Evolutionary theory has proven that the journey of adaptation through hybridization is necessary, constant renewal the key to survival. Yet these changes, inherent in our lives, remain a source of anxiety. Perhaps humanity is unable to evolve beyond that safety switch.

This is fertile territory for artists. As artist Oran Catts, part of collaborative duo The Tissue Culture & Art Projectⁱⁱ, suggested, 'There is a growing gap between our cultural understanding of life and what we are learning about life through science – but even more importantly, what we choose to do to life with technology. It is this gap which makes most of us quite uneasy...with life which comes out of laboratories'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nature Interrupted is a small exploration of this rich speculative territory focusing on the sculptural reach of Australian contemporary art.

Louise Martin-Chew, March 2011

ⁱ "Artist Earns Her Stripes", *The Age*, May 28, 2005.

ⁱⁱ The Tissue Culture & Art Project is part of *21st Century: Art in the First Decade*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 18 December 2010–26 April 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Artist Interview Oran Catts, Wednesday February 16, 2011: <http://21cblog.com/>