

breathing space

Lauren Gower

Nannette Shaw & Fiona Hughes

Nicole Foreshew

Patrina Mununggurr

Tamara Baillie

Simone Slee

Curator: Jessica Clark

breathing space

a space to breathe

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breathing space brings together multidisciplinary works of art that embrace the cyclic and fluid rhythms of breath, memory, knowledge, and time. Embodying ideas of movement and stillness, permanence and impermanence, presence and absence, the works of art draw focus to each of the artists' own unique and reciprocal relationships with materiality in relation to place/s. Through process and form, the works of art each bring care and attention to our surroundings in ways that keep us awake to one another and the world. Together, they can be understood as elemental intermediaries that articulate the sacred relationship between the body and the earth.

Rocks holding up #7 and #8 (2018–21) by Simone Slee balance precariously at the ends of two long and narrow white purpose-made plinths that extend outward from two respective support pillars within the gallery space – one at the beginning of the exhibition and the other at the midpoint. Each sculptural work consists of a hot blown glass bubble that has been shaped and formed through a collaborative process guided by the artist – from the glass blower's first breath to the point it is laid to rest between two pieces of rock or stone that have been sourced from country Victoria.¹ While the bluestone and scoria rock have taken millennia to form, and convey material notions of stability and permanence, the two pieces of rock/stone are simultaneously “held up” and “held down” by the glass bubble. Despite the assumed vulnerability of the glass, it is the element that is actually “doing all the work”. The visual and material tension that builds between the two elements and their new physical points of reciprocal connection invokes a constant state of uncertainty within each assemblage that prompts notions of vulnerability and doubt: To what extent can the glass bubble withstand the pressure?² Will it crack? Will the rocks fall down? Presented and somewhat secured within this balancing act, *Rocks holding up #7 and #8* initiate a performative sculptural investigation into the dual conditions and limitations of materiality.

¹ Simone Slee wishes to pay her respects to the Elders past and present of the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri peoples who are the unceded Traditional Owners of the land on which she lives and works and all other Traditional Owners across Victoria. In her artist statement (2021) she says: “This earth has been cared for over thousands of years by Aboriginal people prior to my families' recent arrival in the nineteenth century. Rocks in this exhibition are selected from quarries and include: bluestone, sourced from a quarry situated on these same lands; and black scoria, from Coragulate, on the volcanic plains of the Western District near Colac, the traditional lands of the Djargurd Wurrung, (also known as the lands of the Eastern Maar people), being the same Country, which has supported my family since I was a teenager.” Simone Slee, Artist Statement for *breathing space* (2021).

² Simone Slee, Artist Statement for *breathing space* (2021).

home

where everything flows from

where everything flows to

the mountain, the river, the sea

*singing the same songs
over and over³*

Interspersed throughout the exhibition space (and this catalogue essay) is a series of five text-based works by Lauren Gower, *meditations on country* (2020–21), that echo the interrelatedness of place, narrative, and movement. Collectively within *breathing space*, the “meditations” exist as poetic and transportive fragments of prose that trace the artist’s lived and felt experiences, following ancestral footsteps and visiting sacred sites on Country in lutriwita / trowerner (Tasmania). Each text has been printed in a warm grey hue and illuminated by a soft orb of light that gives both form and focus to Gower’s physical and remembered stream of consciousness. While each line of text is linear, the path taken is intuitive and organic, and guides a journey that traverses the past, present, and future. The light that washes over each “meditation” encourages a moment of pause, their cumulative experience throughout *breathing space* seemingly melding Gower’s memories with those of the viewers in time and space. Together, *meditations on country* acknowledge the agency of place, while also drawing attention to the subjectivities we attach to our experience, and the historical narratives deeply embedded. Gower articulates the series as a way to return home to self, to reconnect and reconsider how we navigate place/s, how we come to belong to them, and how our movement through the world comes to shape us; “we co-create each other.”⁴

out in the insistent wind

³ Artwork: Lauren Gower, *meditations on country – home coming: going home*, 2020–21, vinyl text, 22 words.

⁴ Lauren Gower, “Disintegration: A Homecoming” (Master of Arts, University of Tasmania, 2017), 238, https://eprints.utas.edu.au/23849/1/Gower_whole_thesis.pdf.

i sink into your skies
you're bare and extraordinary
deep water
hills of white sand
*here, my skin whispers its name*⁵

Nicole Foreshew's monochromatic triptych, *Mirrul 1, Guriin, and Mirrul 2* (2020), appears to levitate at the centre of the gallery's longest wall. The three canvases have been intimately layered with mirrul (white clay) or guriin (charcoal), earth pigments and minerals collected by the artist from across her sacred Wiradjuri homelands. *Mirrul 1, Guriin, and Mirrul 2* are presented with a series of twenty-nine organic sculptural forms made from the same materiality, and collectively titled *Banhirra (stones to make fire)* (2020).⁶ In her artist statement, Foreshew explains that the mirrul from Country is a sacred signification of mourning, and that the guriin has been sourced in between significant sites. In the context of the ongoing global pandemic and climate catastrophe, Foreshew's installation conveys notions of regeneration and renewal – healing through corporeality, material reciprocity, and relational accountability. As a collective, the works make tangible the ngayirr (sacred) relationship between the garraba marrin (body) and the dhaagun (earth) – “investigating concepts of place, tracing personal connections to kin and the material knowledge required to retrieve and revive the body.”⁷ Together, *Mirrul 1, Guriin, and Mirrul 2* and *Banhirra* unearth a mindfulness around our interactions with place, its embedded histories and associated futures – that attest to the current “urgency to cultivate Aboriginal cultural knowledge and the way we see the world and how we care for Country.”⁸

⁵ Artwork: Lauren Gower, *meditations on country – the wind: tebrakunna country*, 2020–21, vinyl text, 26 words.

⁶ *Mirrul 1, Guriin, Mirrul 2, and Banhirra* were originally presented at the Murray Art Museum Albury for the 20:20 (2020) exhibition. 20:20 presented new commissioned work by twenty contemporary Australian artists in response to the pandemic – the works of art that resulted “share visions of a changed world, a more just society, critiques of environmental policy, and the fight for racial justice. 20:20 witnesses our current calamity and seeks insight, kindness and hope.” 20:20, Murray Art Museum Albury. 2020, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://www.mamalbury.com.au/see-and-do/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/2020>.

⁷ Nicole Foreshew, Artist Statement for *breathing space* (2021).

⁸ Foreshew, Artist Statement.

*i dream that places orient themselves
a particular way
and each time i return
they face different directions*

*events move from day to day
the mountain slides down*

*stories return to themselves
generation after generation⁹*

Honouring my ancestral women (2020–21) – an elaborate installation that includes 105 bull kelp vessels by Nannette Shaw and her niece and current student, Fiona Hughes – stretches across the wall directly opposite *Banhirra*. Varying in size and colour, the kelp baskets and water carriers each merge land and sea plant fibres from three different regions across lutruwita (Tasmania).¹⁰ Bull kelp has a material akin to skin; it breathes, moves, undulates, and pulsates with the life of the ocean, though through the process of making, the material has contracted and become brittle. If given the chance to return to the ocean, however, kelp has the incredible ability to “shapeshift” back into its original form.¹¹ The installation of kelp vessels extends outward from the edge of the gallery wall, forming a linear and rippling progression of objects that is reminiscent of the ocean’s surface. Below this line, the remaining vessels have been installed within a scattered arrangement that is suggestive of an ocean swell drawing up, from beneath, cultural knowledges and connections that previously lay dormant. *Honouring my ancestral women* signifies and celebrates cultural continuation through knowledge sharing. Shaw speaks of losing track of time while making her kelp vessels and receiving guidance from her ancestors. She explains: “kelp connects me to who I am, where I come from, and guides me to where I am going ... my place now is to teach the old way ... so we don’t lose it again.”¹²

⁹ Artwork: Lauren Gower, *meditations on country – the sea: leenerretar country*, 2020–21, vinyl text, 35 words.

¹⁰ The land and sea fibres and materials have been gathered from three different regions across lutruwita: (Tasmania); bull kelp gathered from the north-east, Tea-tree sticks from the north-west, and river reeds from the south.

¹¹ Julie Gough, “Shorelines Shape Us: We Are Where We Meet,” in *Sea Her Land* (Melbourne: Craft Victoria, 2018), 4.

¹² Nannette Shaw, Artist Statement for *breathing space* (2021).

*you carry songs
that make the dunes shift
a wind blows, turning inside out*

a chorus of sorts

*and the weight
of thousands of hands
fits in my palm, exactly¹³*

A large-scale projection of Patrina Mununggurr's video work *Gurrkurr Dhälkuma – Strengthening the Bloodlines* (2018–20) fills the entirety of the far back gallery wall, from floor to ceiling. Featuring a close-up portrait view of the artist at the centre of the screen, the video follows Mununggurr's purposeful and methodical process, preparing the gapan (white clay) – a sacred white clay with deep cultural significance to Yolŋu – for ceremony. She explains: "Gapan is very powerful. Yolŋu power ... Yolŋu have always used Gapan – past, present, and future. Gapan helps me to stand strong."¹⁴ The gapan markings that begin to adorn Mununggurr's body as the video progresses are representative of the clouds rebuilding anew to signify the onset of the wet season, and are related to the Dhuwa Wangupini (white cloud) Songline for her people, the Djapu.¹⁵ The slow and ritualised movement, coupled with the artist's direct eye contact, reveals a deeply personal insight into the intimate relationship between artist and materiality, body and earth. The physical connection of gapan painted across her forehead, and over her arms and legs, empowers an ancestral state that strengthens the artist's connection to kin and Country, and articulates the power of culture and spirit in nature. The land, despite constantly changing in response to its annual seasonal cycles, provides a

¹³ Artwork: Lauren Gower, *meditations on country - larener (grinding stone): tebrakunna country*, 2020–21, text, 30 words.

¹⁴ Patrina Mununggurr, Artist Statement for *breathing space* (2021).

¹⁵ "My film shows me painting my forehead with gapan and this represents the Dhuwa wangupini (cloud). My people, the Djapu people sing the cloud song. The Songline tells the Yolŋu to use the gapan. The old people sing the ancient Songlines and ask Yolŋu to paint themselves with gapan before they start performing bunnul (ceremonial dance)." Patrina Mununggurr, Artist Statement for *breathing space* (2021).

constant and binding connection that enacts for all of us an expanded system of belonging. We are of the earth.

*i'm on the road homewards
and you appear
weightless as the morning
a sea above me*

*the sky up here is a different sort of sky
it fills my lungs
with its frays of light*¹⁶

Gurrkurr Dhälkuma – Strengthening the Bloodlines is foregrounded by Tamara Baillie's *Ribwreck* (2020) – a shimmering installation that rises up from the Country beneath the gallery floor. The form of the “ribwreck” is at once suggestive of a decaying ribcage and the partially buried hull of a sunken ship. The installation's skeletal arms stretch upward and inward, forming a series of arcs that each cast a dual shadow that frames the work and evokes the atmospherics of a graveyard on dusk. Their recent movement is indicated by the pooling black sand that remains at their base. A looped recording of the artist's breath – the audio component of *Ribwreck* – echoes throughout the gallery space, bringing focus to the living, breathing Country beneath the gallery floor, but also the breath and life held within each of the works and by way of sonic immersion. In navigating binary notions of growth and decay, and life and death, *Ribwreck* investigates both personal and ecological grief to explore and interrogate our accepted histories and realities.¹⁷ By actively embedding material explorations into personal and collective histories in response to planetary concerns, Baillie prompts a wake-up call to all. She explains: “As a nation and a planet, we've run aground ... How do we move beyond our intertwined legacies of neoliberalism, settler colonialism and environmental

¹⁶ Artwork: Lauren Gower, *meditations on country – the sky: tareernotemmeter country*, 2020–21, vinyl text, 35 words.

¹⁷ Jasmin Stephens, “Tamara Baillie's *Ribwreck* and the Disaffections of Making,” in *Tamara Baillie: Ribwreck* (Sydney: firstdraft Gallery, 2020), n.p., <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bee42891aef1dba9435f57b/t/5f7fc9afa36da512fcea3ef3/1602210227464/October+2020+Roamsheets+BAILLIE+DIGITAL.pdf>.

degradation? As we hover tenuously between deeply troubling pasts and a range of catastrophic futures, is it already too late to save what remains?”¹⁸

Presented together in *breathing space*, the works of art open up a space to share, rejoice, disrupt, and reimagine. The artists each forge reparative approaches to artmaking that collectively initiate an interrelated ecology of actions and interactions that convey a pertinent reflection on our lived experience in the now – with the planet in crisis and a sixth mass extinction underway. Through slow, repeated, and ritualised ways of working, the artists enact a physical and conceptual responsiveness and relatedness to place. The intimate choreography that unfolds between artist, materiality, and place animates a poetic and performative engagement with Country that embraces the understanding of time as cyclic and non-linear, and regards the sacred relationship between the body and the earth as paramount. Together, the reciprocity enacted through process and form awakens a poignant reminder to breathe with awareness, to silence the noise and listen, and reconnect the body with Mother Earth.

*Walking, I feel country in my feet. I become a part of it, I begin to make sense of it, and it begins to make sense of me.*¹⁹

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¹⁸ Tamara Baillie, Artist Statement for *breathing space* (2021).

¹⁹ Lauren Gower, “Disintegration,” 186.

