Protesting with care

Environmental disaster has led to a quiet but powerful visual protest, writes Lesley Duxbury.

As I write this, an advertising campaign is underway on television and the internet to entice visitors and sea/tree-changers to experience Wellington Shire, the Gippsland region in Victoria's east that encompasses Tarra Bulga National Park, the Alpine National Park and Gippsland Coastal Park, and all the towns and small communities in between. The website claims 'you'll find some of Victoria's finest offerings—from scenic mountain ranges, pristine beaches, beautiful wetlands, temperate rainforests and many other beautiful places…' where 'we live an enviable lifestyle every day'.[1] However, some of the inhabitants of these 'tight-knit communities' in Central and East Gippsland, especially the artists, do not view their world through the same rose-coloured glasses. From colonial times the forests have been logged, lush grassy plains built over and turned into farming land, rivers and lakes polluted, and feral animals introduced, which has led to extensive species and biodiversity loss. Now that climate change is becoming apparent in the form of more ferocious bushfires and floods, exacerbating the problem, a number of artists of this region have come together to provoke their viewers into considering the consequences of the warming planet. In an area that includes the small community of Briagolong in the west to the East Gippsland town of Orbost, a group of artists has banded together to quietly and visually protest, through their artwork, against the continuing degradation of their natural environment that is leading to an unconscionable loss of wildlife.

Formed in early 2019 by artist and passionate environmentalist Dawn Stubbs, Concerned Artists Resisting Extinction (CARE) has now enlisted more than 100 local artists and has been the catalyst for a number of exhibitions. Initially an idea of Stubbs' to communicate her environmental concerns more widely, CARE has now grown into a vibrant collective. In early 2019, and galvanised into action by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species[2], her first project was a collaborative artwork with about forty local artists. A larger-than-life papier-mâché dodo egg was fabricated by Chris Stubbs that could be opened to reveal the small-scale paintings, drawings and prints created by the collaborators. Collaged on the outside with photocopies of extinct creatures along with a fragmented list of some of the more than 30,000 species threatened with extinction, the images of many of the local endangered fauna and flora were hidden out of sight within

(above)
Chris Stubbs, *Dodo egg,*
2019, papier- mâché, photocopies, brass hinge, length approx. 60 cm. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Photography: Chris Stubbs.

(opposite)
Gillian Kline, *End of the Road,*
2020, linocut, 45 x 30 cm, edition of 5. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Photography: Gillian Kline.

the egg, in the way of the rarely-seen native animals and plants in the bush. In late 2019 Stubbs and a delegation of six artists took the egg to Parliament House in Canberra and presented it to Darren Chester MP, Member for Gippsland, and the Hon Sussan Ley, MP, Minister for the Environment. The message to them was clear: the catastrophe of species loss that was happening before our eyes was due to the neglect of this issue by those in government responsible for the environment.

Many of the artists, like myself, moved to this part of Gippsland after living, studying and working in Melbourne or other large cities for many years, and over time developed a deep love for the bush and local environment, which is often represented in their work. In 2017, when I relocated to Briagolong, I quickly became aware of the fragility of the environment as, being surrounded by dry sclerophyll forest, the town was regularly threatened by bushfire, and was also prone to flooding. To the north of the town in the mountains, the results of intense fires and devastating floods are clearly evident and on what was once Gippsland red gum grassy woodland and to the south, laser-levelled dairy farms proliferate. In the east, clear-fell logging of old-growth native forests prevails, sanctioned by the State Government. This dichotomy of idyllic landscape and environmental reality has become the focus of my own work and of interest to me in the work of other local artists.

The tremendous support Stubbs received for the dodo egg project was a clear indication of the growing concern of local artists for the state of the environment, heightened in 2019 by dire warnings from the Bureau of Meteorology and the Country Fire Authority of the impending potentially disastrous fire-season ahead, which turned out to be the worst on record. A 6000-kilometre fire-front along the eastern seaboard incinerated more than three billion native creatures and laid waste to their habitat, and at the southern end East Gippsland bore the brunt of the fires. However, devastating as they were to human and non-human animals alike, the fires sparked an ambitious idea. When the ashes cooled and we had all begun to recover Stubbs made an urgent appeal to local artists to come together once again under the CARE banner to create artworks under the title *EMERGENCY—species loss,* in order to draw attention to the plight of thousands of displaced native animals and the millions of acres of destroyed habitats. Almost 100 artists quickly responded. Stubbs' idea was to flood the region with simultaneous exhibitions to arouse public consciousness in the issues, and a productive cooperation between seven galleries was initiated for late 2020. Unfortunately, this plan had to be postponed due to COVID-19. Undeterred, in March this year, during a lockdown pause, Stubbs organised fifty artists to exhibit at the East Gippsland Art Gallery in Bairnsdale and a further five exhibitions took place simultaneously 24 July to 28 August.[3]

Many of the artists involved with CARE shows have painted, drawn or constructed lovingly detailed works of critically endangered creatures or plants, almost as mementos whereas others have engaged with the ravaged habitats. Among the print media artists involved is Gillian Kline, who established the Freestone Press a decade ago near Briagolong. It is a hub for many printmakers in the area and especially the artists involved in CARE. Living here among huge eucalypts along the Freestone Creek, Kline is embedded in the bush and has long been concerned with her local environment, which she draws upon in her prints. Less than 100km away is the LaTrobe Valley, where the electricity generation for Melbourne can easily be seen in the exhaust-induced

(left)
Rosalind Crisp, *Mt. Delusion logging coupe no.7735010025,*
2018, photograph, variable size.
Reproduced with permission of the artist/Omeo Dance Inc.
Photography: Andrew Morrish.

(opposite)
Sue Fraser, *Too Late,*
2019, linocut, 76 x 133 cm, edition of 6.
Reproduced with permission of the artist.
Photography: Iain Fraser.

clouds towering over the landscape. In her linocut, *End of the Road*, a yellow-tailed black cockatoo looks down through the threatening, east-drifting clouds on to land ravaged by industry, farming and home-building; land that was once its natural habitat. Kline also looks down on the landscape through the eyes of this iconic bird whose natural territory continues to be cleared, leading to a loss of food and nesting sites. While this is not the view from her home, she is clearly aware how close the encroaching industrial landscape is and how grim the situation for the cockatoo.

Valmai Todd lives in the small community of Briagolong and has a long connection with Cape Conran Coastal Park on East Gippsland's wilderness coast. However, the ferocity of the 2019-20 fires acutely changed this coastal paradise. Once rich with coastal banksias, manna gums and wildlife including New Holland honeyeaters and Victoria's largest lizard, the Lace Monitor, the park was burnt black right down to the ocean. Todd returned to Cape Conran nine months after the fires and camped there again to find the absence of any sound; no birdcalls and no insects, 'truly sad… the landscape seemed devastated'[4]. She goes on to describe:

> *the once dense green bush of ancient banksias and magnificent gum trees had been reduced to a tangled network of charred branches. Grey, burnt browns and black dominated the bush palette. An angular mesh against the sky. Ocean views were visible where once it was thick bush. The abundance of birdlife, possums, snakes, wombats, wallabies and myriads of insects that found shelter here were nowhere to be seen. The silence was profound.*[5]

In normal times Todd's expertly cut, registered and printed linocuts teem with life, colour and intricate details. Following her visit to Cape Conran after the fires, her colour-reduction linocut *Survival*, is the opposite in many ways. The muted palette and bold, simplified shapes depict a lifeless environment and a mood in normal circumstances not attributed to this vibrant artist. Her sadness and empathy for this familiar environment are so evident in this print.

Maffra resident Judy Dorber is one of a number of artists who once a week make an excursion to draw *en plein air* in natural environments as far away as the Sale wetlands but most regularly in the Forest Redgum Reserve on the southern fringe of Briagolong. Dorber's particular interests in the eucalypt forest are in its canopy and the nourishment it provides for a wide range of fauna and flora such as echidnas, gliders, choughs and chocolate lilies; where 'each species of wildlife forage, feed, find refuge, and breed in woodland vegetation in the ecosystems in and beneath the canopy, on the forest floor'[6]. Dorber is acutely aware of the interacting microsystems of even such a dry and lifeless-looking forest; microsystems, often invisible to human animals, that were destroyed in the 2019-20 fires, (though thankfully not this particular reserve this time). In her print *Understorey*, she has imagined the layers of vegetation on the forest floor and mimicked nature by printing and overprinting directly from found leaves, bark and feathers, building layers and textures. Her intention, to stress the importance of such a support system for the wildlife that depends on it and is increasingly under threat, is one that will become more important in coming years.

Further to the east in Stratford, Sue Fraser's large-scale linocut prints are often allegorical and retell old fables and traditional fairy stories with a contemporary twist. Fraser often uses religious images in her prints, and almost always depicts a woman as the protagonist. In *Too Late,* an Eve-like figure

holds an apple, the forbidden fruit, while tempting an already extinct dodo with seed. The apple, a symbol for knowledge, immortality and temptation, led to the fall of man and loss of innocence. Those Christians with a literal interpretation of the creation story believe humans have the right to use the earth's finite resources for their own benefit. *Too Late* demonstrates the results of such thinking that has transcended religion and has seemingly become commonplace in everyday life.

In 2017, dancer/choreographer with more than thirty years' experience, Rosalind Crisp, initiated her ongoing project *DIRt* (Dance in Regional disasTer zones) in Omeo in East Gippsland, 'drawing artists and ecologists together to ask how dance and arts practice can embody, understand and connect to the unfolding environmental devastation in East Gippsland'.[7] Through poignant dance performances in decimated forests, Crisp embodies the feelings and emotions evoked by indiscriminate logging and out-of-control planned burns, often impressing her body on the felled and blackened trees. Here on Mt Delusion, VicForests, a state-owned business, is currently logging the last old alpine ash forests, converting complex native forests into agricultural mono-crops, while planned burns are destroying local wildlife and the last remaining habitats of sooty owls, powerful owls, yellow bellied gliders and greater gliders. In the way of a print, Crisp leaves 'impressions' of her dance/performances on her viewers in live performances and traces of them in documentary photographs, which most recently were scaled to fit the windows of the East Gippsland Art Gallery. It looks as though Rosalind is destined to perform a never-ending dance into the future as currently, the ancient long-unburnt forests of Mt Delusion are all marked for clear-felling.

CARE came about because of the concerns of a collection of artists over the impacts and pressures on the natural world and the exploitation of what is left of Australia's wilderness areas and the species that rely on them. The quiet, visual protests of CARE artists bring a unique and challenging dialogue to the issues facing the flora and fauna of this country. Taking a philosophical, pragmatic, political and humanist approach, CARE hopes to move creative people and their viewers to be inspired, encouraged and moved to act.

Notes

1. https://themiddleofeverywhere.com.au/en. Accessed 17 June 2021.
2. https://www.iucnredlist.org/. 86 Australian animals are considered critically endangered
3. Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale, Briagolong Art Gallery, Orbost Exhibition Centre, Great Alpine Gallery, Swifts Creek and Maffra Exhibition Space
4. Todd, Valmai, from her artist statement for *EMERGENCY—Species Loss*, June 2021.
5. Ibid.
6. Dorber, Judy, from her artist statement for *EMERGENCY—Species Loss,* June 2021.
7. https://www.omeodance.com/dirt-traces. DIRt is produced by Omeo Dance Inc., supported by East Gippsland Art Gallery, the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria, and the Regional Arts Fund.

Lesley Duxbury is an artist and researcher living in Briagolong. Recent exhibitions include, *Notes from the Field* at MAMA, NSW and *Reflection/Submersion*, a Perth Festival exhibition at Holmes a Court Gallery, 2021. She held a survey exhibition, *Echo*, at Gippsland Art Gallery Sale in 2019. She is a Professor Emerita at RMIT University.

(above)
Judy Dorber, *Understory*,
2021, multi-layered relief print, 81 x 54 cm, unique state.
Reproduced with permission of the artist.
Photography: Judy Dorber.

(left)
Valmai Todd, *Survival*,
2021, reduction linocut, 30 x 15 cm, edition of 10.
Reproduced with permission of the artist.
Photography: Lesley Duxbury.