



URBAN ARBOREAL

the tree in the grid

We tend to experience the bush as a vertical screen, an indeterminate, all-over blur of leaves and grasses, trunks and branches, bark and blossom. It is easy to get lost when you can't see the trees for the bush.

Things are different in the city. Here, we move about on a flat plane, clearly measured and gridded into building blocks, lines of movement and designated areas of assembly and recreation. Here, the unruly ecosystem is overtaken by order. Here, trees become singular things with individual identities. Poignant reminders of the organic world, they satisfy deep-seated instincts for shade, shelter and refuge. They are there for birds to perch in, dogs to sniff at, children to climb.

Local totems, they mark home and neighbourhood, the journey to work or lunch in the gardens.

This exhibition is about the place and shape of nature in the urban environment. It has grown out of a survey of photographs (in the City's Art and Heritage Collection) of individual trees in particular locations around the city. These images show trees being tended and repaired, being lifted into position by cranes and felled by storms, trees chiselled into fairylands for children, or sawn into hardwood blocks for road making.

Complementing these intriguing images is an array of sculptures, prints and drawings by eight contemporary artists. Like the photographs, these works suggest the variety and complexity of nature: surface details of wood and bark, nets of branches and twigs, fringes of leaves,

patterns of light and shade, growth and form. Yet, like the photographs, they also describe the taming and reshaping of nature: the trimming of garden hedges, the powerline pruning of suburban nature-strip plantings, the carving of wood into abstracted, un-natural forms.

We are living at a time when our relationship to the natural environment is increasingly stretched and narrowed. This exhibition is intended as a small reminder of the interconnectedness of things. Looking at these images - bizarre and beautiful, dry and delicate - we might be encouraged to consider more carefully the tree outside the window.

Robert Bridgewater's *Red Tree* (cat. no. 12) is a strange arboreal cipher, an abstract ghost of a tree. Bulging and jointed like a finger or a tight-skirted flamenco dancer (but pine or poplar-stretched), it bears neither branches nor foliage. Indeed, at first sight it seems more like some alien cactus, with its tall, rippling form and inverted spines. Yet the sculpture quite determinedly asserts the idea of 'tree-ness'. The circular scales that define its boundary, its woody skin, suggest the scars left behind when limbs are pruned. Their beady, faceted surfaces catch the light like shiny leaves. Behind and within this silvery bark, blood-red sap gulps and flows.

For Julie Gough, the sticky blood-link is to Tasmanian Aboriginal (Palawa) ancestors. *Regeneration* (cat. nos. 13 & 14) refers in particular to the woman Woretermoeyenner, whose name means 'eucalyptus leaf'. Gough identifies with

Woretermoeyenner's life of wide and constant travel. In 2004-05 she paid homage to her ancestor in an artwork at Chewton in the Victorian goldfields, a 60-metre long drawing in quartz of a Tasmanian gum leaf. As with much of Gough's work, *Regeneration* operates by the linkage and layering of material and meaning. In the site-specific element, the Palawa name and the forest site suggested the Tasmanian Blue Gum leaf as a motif, which was then 'drawn' in the abundant local quartz. The related object sculpture carries similar weights: gold in the shiny metal of each leaf, family descent in their steady, generational succession along the branch.

Across the gallery's west wall and one of its windows, Lucy Griggs has painted a tracery of silhouetted tree branches (cat. no. 15). While this kind of imagery is not unfamiliar from contemporary art, fashion and graphic design, Griggs has developed a personal approach inspired by folk tales and children's stories, magic realist literature and pop music lyrics. She finds gothic mystery in these nerve-fibre networks, which she elaborates with subtle allusions to unexplained narratives: a pair of spectacles hanging from a twig, for example, a black bird posed as witness or menace, a rabbit in the moon. Here, the untold story hovers teasingly between inside and outside space, somewhere between the photograph of municipal tree-planting in Swanston Street, Griggs' painting on the gallery window and the actual tree visible through the glass.

For Kim Westcott, too, the arboreal essence is entanglement. It is one of evolution's little miracles that a tree's branches and

roots occupy the maximum volume of air and earth without touching. Yet what we actually see is a flat pattern of crossed and knotted lines. Westcott revels in the misreading that results from our limited senses, the slippage between knowledge and vision. In *Mother* (cat. No. 21) she describes the broken, bracken bush of her home in the Warby Ranges as a complex, organic-abstract interlacing of tendrils tracks. The work also carries a sense of opposition, of potential positive-negative inversion, a sense that dark-against-sky-bright branches are analogous to white-within-dirt-dark roots. The effect of intricate beading in *Mother*, created by drilling into the etching plate, then wiping the holes clean after inking, enlivens the branches with spritzing lines of bubbles, silver constellations that wink both at Bridgewater's dot-bark and at the fairy lights of St Kilda Road.

Here is a second layer of domestication, a further indignity for city trees already struggling against an alien environment. Not only are Melbourne's celebrated elms and other European species an entire hemisphere away from their native environment, not only must they struggle against a hard casing of cement and bitumen, but they must also endure the fairy lights, the initials of the love-struck and possum-proofing steel corsets. Even worse are the unwelcome attentions of the unrestrained lopper. The street parade of piebald-barked, knob-headed plane trees is a characteristically Melbourne image.

Nature-strip trees in many newer suburbs are native species: scraggy, footpath-cracking eucalypts. Since they do not

respond well to pollarding, the gums are individually cut and shaped to let powerlines through. Vin Ryan documents this practice in his *Tree game* series (cat. no. 18). At one level, these drawings are straightforward exercises in virtuoso realist technique. At another, they are complex artistic and social statements. The elimination of background streets, fences and houses (and the wires themselves), makes the tree into an absurd found object, a fantastical silhouette, a Rorschach blot. In addition, Ryan's deliberately restricted use of colour in these works wittily alludes to the authority of the municipal bureaucrat's black, blue and red shirt-pocket bibos.

Like Ryan, Kristin Headlam is careful not to make her garden green. In a series of works entitled *A gardener at midnight* (cat. no. 16), an eerie moonlight or lamplight restricts visibility to contrasts and gradings of tone, permitting the artist to choose any shirt-pocket chromatic note she pleases. Also like Ryan, Headlam seems to revel in the weirdness of arboreal form. Her maze-hedges, her formal *parterres*, her neat topiary ball-bushes (cat. no. 17) are plants behaving as they are told. Behind the baubles and trimmings of urban sophistication lies the biblical-imperial injunction to fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing. Headlam's gardens are perfectly ordered, but always in shadow.

Andrew Seward eschews grandeur, planning and control in favour of humility, chance and submission. *Silva* (cat. no. 19) is a series of 12 frames, each containing 16 joined sheets, on which are 167 pencil drawings (some pages are left blank, like rests in musical notation).

The drawings are delicate, actual-size renderings of small pieces of wood, fragments selected during walks in bush, park and playground. There is something antiquarian, even archaeological about *Silva*. The grey graphitic glyphs float on the paper like illustrations of stone tools or pottery shards in an excavation report. There is something anachronistic and also something ironic about the work, in the fact that a drawing of woodchips (which Australia exports to Japan to be made into paper) should be on antique cotton rag paper. There is something obsessive, something distinctly nutty about dedicating two years of one's life to the graphic service of randomly collected woodchips. Yet, there is also something philosophical here, too, a proving of the capacities and boundaries of seeing, knowing and making. Microscopic detail reveals the limits of empiricism, and the probability of art is shown to be a matter not of skill and invention but of analogy and sympathy.

Such metaphorical translation of the world is the ultimate rationale behind this exhibition. Everything that is, is also what it is not. In the 19th and 20th centuries, many of Melbourne's city streets were laid on a substrate of hardwood. When the road surface deteriorated and was replaced, the well-seasoned redgum blocks were ripped up and given to pensioners for fuel. What exactly were they at this time? Trees, timber, cobbles, waste, firewood or social welfare?

Such ontological insecurity also flavours Catherine Truman's jewellery and objects (cat. no. 20). Carved from light, close-grained lime wood and painted and inked in red and black, they pose as something other than what they are: elastic bands, plaits,

curtains. They are pure, solid paradox. Yet they lie in their case like seven peas in a pod, evidently related. How so? I think it is because they all conjure up thoughts about the workings of the body. The rubber bands suggest the squeeze and stretch of flexion and extension, or the peristaltic action of the digestive tract. The plait of twisted yarn or string is clumped and striated like a muscle, too, while the curtains or kerchiefs are bunched like a waist or a ponytail. These are corporeal, somatic things. Yet consider them in the context of this exhibition. Might the rubber bands be tree-growth age-rings, pruning scars, nesting hollows? Is the loose hank of string a twist of bark, the plait an arboreal tree-carving, the cloths ringbarked stumps?

What all these works do is remind us that there are no ideal, or definitive, forms. Things are always morphing into something else, something new and unrecognisable. We may think of a tree in terms of a body, with straight trunk dispersing into multiple branches, with elbows and wide-splayed fingers. Yet equally, a tree may be shaped into a topiary ball. When its life comes to an end, it will decay into compost, or be brutally converted into planks, paper or charcoal. It may be fashioned into furniture or sculpture. When does it stop being a tree and become something else altogether?

Take these ideas for a walk in the park, and watch certainty fall, like a leaf.

David Hansen
Melbourne
May 2007

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David Hansen, Curator

Exhibition Dates: 29 June 2007 15 September 2007	Gallery hours: Mon 10am-2pm Tue-Thu 11am-6pm Fri 11am-6:30pm Sat 10am-4pm
City Gallery: Melbourne Town Hall, Swanston Street	Enquiries: Telephone (03) 9658 9638 or melbourne@city.vic.gov.au/farts
Free admission	City Gallery hosts free exhibitions inspired by the City of Melbourne's Art and Heritage Collection. Specialist curators are engaged to create exhibitions that delve into the artistic, cultural and historic life of Melbourne.
Designed by round, on Tudor RP 100% Recycled	

14 - JULIE GOUGH (b. 1965)
Regeneration 2005
photograph of quartz earthwork/
installation, Chewton, Victoria
5 x 140 x 6000
(approx., original installation)
Courtesy the artist, Andrea
and Peter Hylands and Gallery
Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

15 - LUCY GRIGGS (b. 1976)
Telescope silhouette (wall drawing # 6) 2007
acrylic on wall and glass
dimensions variable, Courtesy the artist.
Special thanks to Bo Stahlman
(Reproduced: *Treescape silhouette*
(wall drawing # 3) 2006 (detail))

16 - KRISTIN HEADLAM
(b. 1953)
A gardener at midnight II 1994
colour lithograph, 21 x 21
Courtesy the artist and
Charles Nodrum Gallery,
Melbourne

17 - JULIE GOUGH (b. 1965)
Regeneration 2005
eucalypt branch, bronze
210 x 8 x 140 (approx.)
Courtesy the artist,
Andrea and Peter Hylands
and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi,
Melbourne

18 - CATHERINE TRUMAN (b. 1957)
Seven objects 2001-02
English lime wood, paint,
shu niku ink
Dimensions various (largest 12.5)
Courtesy the artist
and Gallery Funaki,
Melbourne

19 - ANDREW SEWARD
(b. 1967)
Silva 2005-06 (four sheets
from a sequence of twelve)
pencil on 1947 AGM/JM
Green watercolour paper
77.5 x 57.5 (each sheet)
Courtesy the artist

20 - KIM WESTCOTT (b. 1968)
Mother 2007
drypoint, 120 x 90
Courtesy the artist and
Australian Art Resources,
Melbourne

21 - VIN RYAN (b. 1969)
Blue tree (Sunshine) 2007
colour pencil, 75 x 85
Courtesy the artist
(Reproduced: *Red tree*
(Sunshine) 2007)

1 - OLA COHN (1892-1964)
(Weeping fairy)
detail of *The Fairies Tree* 1931-34
carved and painted eucalyptus
stump, Fitzroy Gardens
Exhibition photograph, Art
and Heritage Collection,
City of Melbourne

2 - ROBERT BRIDGEWATER (b. 1971)
Red tree 2002
carved and painted wood
320 x 70 x 40
Courtesy the artist and
Niagara Galleries,
Melbourne

3 - A.O. BARRETT,
Australian's Entail, Melbourne:
Robertson & Mullens, 1937
Parks & Gardens library archive,
Art and Heritage Collection,
City of Melbourne

4 - A.O. BARRETT,
Australian's Entail, Melbourne:
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Parks & Gardens library archive,
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5 - *Tree brought down by gale
smashing children's slide &
Cyclone facing, Stanley Street,
North Melbourne, August 1959*
City Engineer's Department
photograph file, vol. 1, p.20,
Art and Heritage Collection,
City of Melbourne

6 - *Woodblocks for fence-makers,
August 1960*
sequence of seven photographs,
each image approx. 7 x 7 cm.
City Engineer's Department
photograph file, vol. 2, p.10,
Art and Heritage Collection,
City of Melbourne

7 - *(Tree uprooted by storm)*
c.1960s
Parks & Gardens
Department photograph
print, Art and Heritage
Collection, City
of Melbourne

8 - *(Tree planting, Town Hall,
Swanston Street)* c.1965-70
Parks & Gardens Department
35 mm. slide, Art and
Heritage Collection, City
of Melbourne

9 - *THE POWER OF TREES TO PRECIPITATE
WATER FROM FALLING RAIN*
In this case Australian trees have no rivals. Of a
European continent none, whether an old-growth
rainforest or a young plantation, can rival the
ability of our trees to bring down rain.
Long have I passed and gone back again after the
rain has ceased to waste space and energy in the
air. The power of old forests to bring down rain is
of a great deal of rain to be seen in the forest.
On the matter of old forests to bring down rain,
there is a story, on the other side of the
continent, that the Indians used to tell of a
great tree, which was so tall, that a man could
stand on its top, and throw a spear into the
clouds, and a shower of rain would fall upon the
earth. The Indians called this tree the 'Rain
Maker'. It was a tree of great power, and it
was said that it was the only tree of its kind
in the world.
After the rain has ceased, go back and watch
the water drip from the leaves and from the
branches when the sun comes out, and realize that all
this

10 - *Autumn in the Fitzroy Gardens*
c.1950s?
Parks & Gardens
Department photograph
print, Art and Heritage
Collection, City of
Melbourne

11 - *(Tree surgery: illustration from
unidentified horticultural text)*
c.1930s?
Parks & Gardens Department
glass slide no. 38, Art and
Heritage Collection,
City of Melbourne

12 - *(Tree surgery: illustration from
unidentified horticultural text)*
c.1930s?
Parks & Gardens Department
glass slide no. 41,
Art and Heritage Collection,
City of Melbourne

13 - W.W. PETTIGREW,
*Municipal Parks: Layout,
Management and Administration*,
London: The Journal of Park
Administration Ltd, 1937
Parks & Gardens library archive,
Art and Heritage Collection,
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