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THE Vanishing

AN EXHIBITION BY EMMA LINDSAY AND MARGARET KLIN



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AN EXHIBITION BY EMMA LINDSAY AND MARGARET KILIN

**REDLAND ART GALLERY,
CLEVELAND**

SUNDAY 5 JUNE –
SUNDAY 10 JULY 2011

As the demands of the world's human population come closer to tipping the scales of ecological sustainability, the effects are increasingly being felt at a local level. *The Vanishing* draws attention to the relevance of these concerns to our immediate environments. The work of Margaret Kilin and Emma Lindsay explores, in different ways, the devastating impacts of environmental change and intervention on some species in Australia and the broad nature of its consequences for our culture.

Developed out of a project begun three years ago, Margaret Kilin's work grew out of her growing concern for the long-term impacts of environmental degradation on coastal life forms. Focusing on mangroves as case study and symbol, Kilin made frequent visits to wetlands around Brisbane to witness the effects of change on an environment whose delicate beauty, despite its prevalence along Queensland's coast, remains largely overlooked. Although mangrove trees offer significant and unique habitats to birds, mammals, crustacea, and fish populations, they remain largely at the edge of our consciousness. As a fringe dweller in the murky shallows of the littoral zone, this species resists the modern penchant to categorise life in simple terms and makes its home between land and sea. Perhaps for this reason they have often suffered a poor reputation as unpleasant and unsafe.

Spreading their spindly finger-like aerial roots along the muddy edges of tidal wetlands, as mangrove trees crowd together along shorelines, they stabilise and protect its vulnerable terrain from erosion. In *Deconstructed/reconstructed 2* (2008), we can see their densely interlocking branches appear like a frieze through which interdependent and intersecting stories can be read – of complex marine food chains, breeding habitats and protected 'nurseries' where offspring mature. The important role played by mangroves in the improvement of water quality, by filtering and assimilating pollutants, has been recognised for some time. Recently, though, the discovery that tropical mangrove trees are better at storing climate-warming carbon than most other forests

means that they are crucially now both ecologically and economically worth defending.¹

Made increasingly aware of the fragility of this important part of our ecosystem, the timbre of Kilin's work has changed. Early work, like *Mangroves 1* (2007) and *Mangrove line* (2008), explored the decorative possibilities of these largely unsung but arresting trees. They reveal, through the use of restrained line and a limited palette, a threatened species haunted by its own future as it suffers under the effects of pollution, climate change, and the encroachment of human development. In later work, we see the way in which the artist's imagining has extrapolated upon exactly what the catastrophic destruction of these important forests might mean. *Vanishing 1* (2011) and *Vanishing landscape* (2011) witness the process of the demise of these precious fragments of the landscape as the tree forms are slowly overwhelmed by a fearful emptiness. The tragic dénouement of that vision becomes clear in *Time 1* (2011).

Kilin's meditation on change in our environment can be read on more than one level however, attesting to the fact that the true nature of our evolving circumstances is often best revealed in the art we make. The spare simplicity of Kilin's work – in *I know trucks and trains* (2008) and *Tapestry 2* (2011) for example – reflects our increasing reorientation away from Western traditions to modes that emanate from our geographical location in the Asia-Pacific. Such images also speak of the way in which technology has imbued artistic practice, with such paintings the result of a hybrid use of media that draws on photography and computer manipulation as much as it does the artist's painted gesture. Each aspect demonstrates, in its way, a human response to change.

Emma Lindsay's paintings offer a more overt comment on the cost to nature of human consumption. At the same time, though, they provide a broad insight into the complex nature of our era. Following a visit to the taxidermy bird collection of the Queensland Museum in 2007, Lindsay felt impelled to record the stories of its sad constituents for a contemporary audience.

The collection speaks of the history and cost of human consumption to these beautiful creatures. It also highlights the grim paradox to be found in the fact that the artefacts are preserved to mimic what has been destroyed. Overwhelmed by the feeling of loss that the archive represented, Lindsay embarked on a series of 'portraits' of the birds in an attempt to recreate something of the unique beauty that had, ironically, been their downfall. While each rendering draws our attention to the brilliantly coloured plumage of a particular specimen, its impact is invariably undermined by the dull vacancy of the bird's eyes and the stilted stiffness of their figuration.

Lindsay's preparatory research led her to John Gould, the famous English ornithologist who, in the mid nineteenth century, prepared the first comprehensive survey of the birds of Australia. Gould assembled extensive collections of birds and other fauna in his antipodean travels. One particularly elusive and secretive species he identified was the Night Parrot, which is endemic to the continent of Australia. In 2008, Lindsay herself made a pilgrimage to the Diamantina area of Queensland where the last known Night Parrot specimen had been found. Her response to that experience is evident in *Acolyte* (2009), which pictures the tragic headless body that was found there. Believed for many years to be extinct but now categorised as critically endangered following a few rare sightings since 1979, its body remains in the Queensland Museum's collection as a confronting reminder of the precarious existence of this species of bird.

The awkward lifelessness of all of the feathered forms portrayed here is emphasised with their capture a second time in Lindsay's seemingly arbitrary and artificially regimented and numbered compositions. Grouped together like specimens on the unyielding gallery wall, these portraits swarm together to form a veritable flock. Each haunting and ghostly presence, which hovers just below the surface of every representation, forces us to acknowledge the mute echoes of these lost histories and squandered gifts.

THE COLLECTION
SPEAKS OF THE
HISTORY AND
COST OF HUMAN
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Deborah Zabarenko *Mangroves excel at storing carbon*, ABC Science, 4 April, 2011
www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2011/04/04/3181798.htm

THESE ARTISTS
CHALLENGE US
TO REORIENT
OUR COLLECTIVE
CONCERNS

For this artist too, the mixing of media and artistic traditions produces the opportunity for more complex invocations of her underlying plea for ecological awareness and responsibility. Increasingly human experience takes place at arm's length, through processes of simulated experience and the costs of our actions are easy to ignore. Against this, in *Carnage* (2010), Lindsay used performance as the means to share experiences with her audience within the visual domain. Subsequently available for viewing through its video documentation, *Carnage* (2010) is an ephemeral work that records a one-night-only experimental solo exhibition project in which a flock of hundreds of plasticine birds, hand-made by the artist, were dramatically sacrificed for the sake of a human imperative. In performance, the often destructive processes for which we are, as a community, responsible, were symbolically re-enacted. Through it, the audience had the opportunity to share in the type of elucidating sensory experience from which we are so often disengaged.

The subtext that accompanies the work of these two artists is a comment on the complex and often invisible inter-relationships that are evolving to structure our world in the new millennium. Once the mainstay of Australian art, as an expression of nationalism, Kilin's current use of the landscape genre reflects our cross-cultural influences and technological sophistication. Similarly, Lindsay's ornithological studies function as a metaphoric expression of the relation between contemporary life and the natural world. For our largely migrant society, identity is now interwoven between places that extend far beyond Australia's boundaries, and relates more to a sense of shared community experience than to shared history. These artists challenge us to reorient our collective concerns so that we can account for the way in which Australia undergoes what is an inevitable transformation.

Susan Rothnie
April 2011



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Images:

1. Margaret Kilin, *I know trucks and trains* 2008, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.
2. Emma Lindsay #38 (detail) 2009, oil on canvas paper. Courtesy of the artist.
3. Margaret Kilin, *Mangroves 1* (detail) 2007, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.
4. Emma Lindsay, *Carnage* 2010, performance still. Courtesy of the artist. Photography by Carl Warner.
5. Margaret Kilin, *Deconstructed/reconstructed 2* (detail) 2008, synthetic polymer paint on perspex. Courtesy of the artist.
6. Margaret Kilin, *Vanishing landscape* (detail) 2011, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.
7. Emma Lindsay, *Acolyte* (detail) 2008, pencil and pen on Arches paper. Courtesy of the artist. Photography by Carl Warner.

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets,
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Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm
Sunday 9am – 2pm
Admission free

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www.more2redlands.com.au/ArtGallery



*Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland City Council,
dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiuliana*