

With ^{OR}
without:
NICOLA MOSS



REDLAND ART GALLERY
CLEVELAND

Sunday 3 November –
Sunday 8 December 2013



Cutting a twenty-first century conundrum

What strikes you immediately about Nicola Moss' art work is its intricacy, fragility and impermanence, counterbalanced by a stillness and quietude. In essence, her aesthetic process encapsulates the rejuvenating qualities of a complex, yet frail, natural world – the primary concern of her artistic investigations. *With or without* is the artist's second major exhibition at Redland Art Gallery, engaging with the unique but threatened environment and habitat of the Redlands and South Moreton Bay region.

In earlier bodies of work Moss examined botanical species, the native Australian flora that surrounds us which is necessary to native birdlife and fauna but which many of us are becoming increasingly oblivious to in our disconnected, suburban lifestyles. Essential to the biological food chain, countless native species are disappearing with the development of bushland areas and the spread of introduced plants and weeds. Through community volunteering and residencies her art works both recorded and responded to the process of deforestation.¹

Environmental sustainability and the protection of ecological biodiversity are at the very heart of not only Moss' aesthetic practice, but also her lifestyle choices. The artist's environmental or 'eco art' is part of a 21st century groundswell of political and artistic activity driven by recent scientific research on an impending planetary crisis.

American arts writer and curator Linda Weintraub identifies eco art's key attributes as being focussed on environmental issues in conceptual, material and expressive components, with interconnectedness between both the work and its context, and dynamism provoking action and change. It is art work which is ecocentric in both thematic interpretation and process.² These four elements are all evident in Nicola Moss' current practice.

In *With or without* Moss turns her attention from the biodiversity of the forest floor and canopy on the mainland to the waters and intertidal zones of the Moreton Bay Marine Park – a RAMSAR site listed under the United Nations Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. Through volunteering with Earthwatch's *Turtles in Trouble* program at the Moreton Bay Research Station on North Stradbroke Island she gained new insight into the impact of urban waste on marine life. The experience informed the resulting body of work.



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With her *Life on the edge* works, paper cut silhouettes of mangroves, seagrasses and water flow, or frottaged leaf-like forms, are collaged against the jarring outlines of marine waste, tangled fishing line and the chemical compounds of plastic. Look closely and the manmade elements disrupt the harmony of an otherwise natural order but taken at a glance they blend into the patterned surface of the picture plane. Perhaps we've become so inured to the effects of pollution that we fail to notice it and see the discord.

In Moss's *RE:CON* series, the artist's sustainability message becomes even louder through the integration of text and repetition of images of the contaminating by-products of human habitation. PET plastic bottles and the international symbol for recycling are integrated time and again against the fluid washes of a painted watery background, Moss provoking us to rise above our apathy to consider, conserve and contain our consumption of petrochemical-based plastics. The familiar image of the human brain alludes to the cortical folds and structures of marine coral and mangroves, while also reminding us of the need to think before we act.

Grey nurse sharks, Loggerhead turtles, Green turtles, Dugong, Beach stone-curlews and Wallum froglets, local endangered and vulnerable species, are brought together in Moss' ecological mandala *Priority species (Moreton Bay)*. As an artwork, it symbolises not only the artist's but also humanity's spiritual interconnectedness with nature and the need for balance to maintain the global and cosmic order. Within the radial form, though, are intertwined the manmade nets and excavators which can, when used without check, destroy the equilibrium of already strained marine ecosystems.

For Nicola Moss environmental awareness and sustainability are not new concerns, or a superficial response to the 'green' trend, but part of an ongoing artistic idiom, informed by her political, spiritual and philosophical beliefs, as well as volunteering activities over the years. Her work aligns with sustainism – a new cultural movement or era linked to the concerns and values of sustainability, locality, interconnectedness, fairness, and a long-term view of human endeavour.³ Her practice stems from a collective worldview that stresses the interdependence between cultural and natural environments, where nature is a source rather than a resource.

In works such as *Grey Matter*, *What does green mean* and *Food chain*, Moss branches out literally and metaphorically from her use of traditional materials and techniques, to integrate the waste products she critiques in installation works that extend beyond the conventional picture frame. The flotsam and jetsam of non-biodegradable rubbish, so perilous to Moreton Bay's rare marine life, is collected, reformed and re-presented for the viewer's consideration.

We are left to contemplate the over-packaging and overuse of plastics in our contemporary lifestyles. Even the 'green' shopping bag is fabricated from polypropylene. Moss highlights the conundrum – what can we live with or without or how can we live differently if we want to preserve the biodiversity of this internationally significant waterway. In a final satirical gesture Moss includes a cerebrum of plastic disposable soy sauce bottles. Fish-shaped, they too are destined to become marine refuse, floating on ocean currents until ingested by unsuspecting sea creatures.

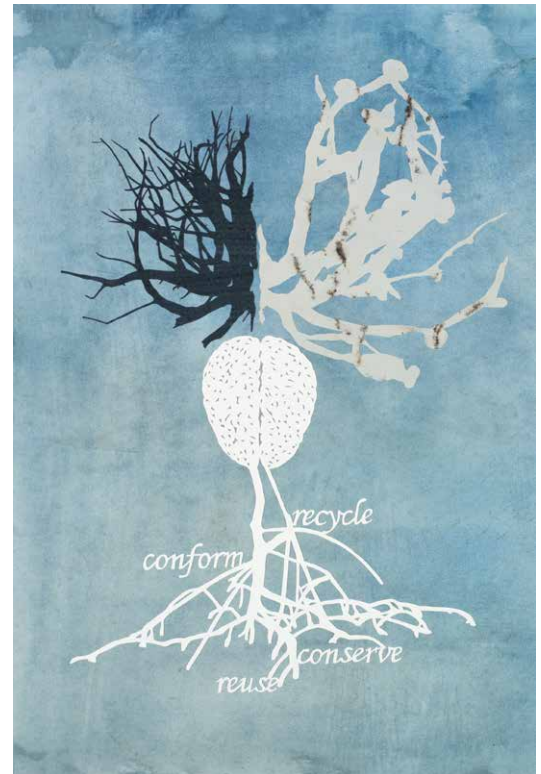
In *With or without* Nicola Moss demonstrates that a new planetary or ecological consciousness needs to evolve, inspired by a shared sense of responsibility toward the earth as home to all life that dwells upon it. The political underpinnings of her art in no way compromise or detract from its aesthetics. She appeals to us as 'the artist/activist' for as Australian art historian Terry Smith contends, in the current crisis situation "the aesthetic-versus-activist dichotomy is false".⁴

Contemporary art has entered a new phase where artists are increasingly to be numbered among those who actively raise awareness of the issues. Nicola Moss continues to push the boundaries of her art both stylistically and conceptually in her ongoing homage to nature.

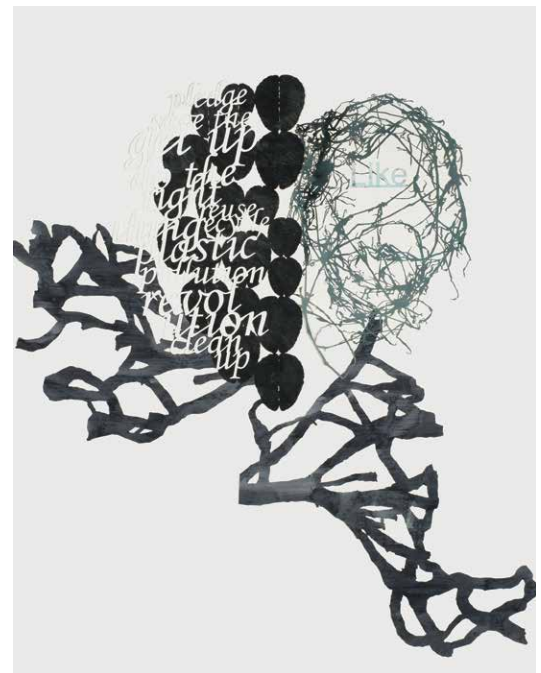
Stephanie Lindquist,
Director

Endnotes:

1. Alison Kubler, *Plant-life: an exhibition by Nicola Moss* (Cleveland: Redland Art Gallery, 2010) and conversations with the artist.
2. Linda Weintraub, *To life: eco art in pursuit of a sustainable planet* (Berkeley: University of California, 2012), 7.
3. Michiel Schwarz & Joost Elffers, *Sustainism is the new modernism: a cultural manifesto for the sustainist era* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2010).
4. Terry Smith, *Contemporary art: world currents* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011), 295.



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Image credits:

Cover: *Life on the edge – High Tide* (detail) 2011,
synthetic polymer paint, natural ochre
charcoal frottage, hand cut papers,
78 x 173cm.

2. *Conundrum* (RE:CON series) 2013,
synthetic polymer paint, frottage,
hand cut papers,
74 x 54cm.

3. *Consider* (RE:CON series) 2013,
synthetic polymer paint, frottage,
hand cut papers,
74 x 54cm.

4. *Status update* (Virtual – Reality) (detail) 2013,
synthetic polymer paint, frottage,
hand cut papers,
140 x 127cm (variable).

5. *Life on the edge – citizen science*
(Mangrove watch) 2013,
synthetic polymer paint, natural ochre,
charcoal frottage, hand cut papers,
106 x 154cm.

6. *Priority species* (Moreton Bay) 2013,
synthetic polymer paint on hand cut paper,
137cm diameter.

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Photography by Carl Warner.

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets
Cleveland Q 4163
Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm
Sunday 9am – 2pm

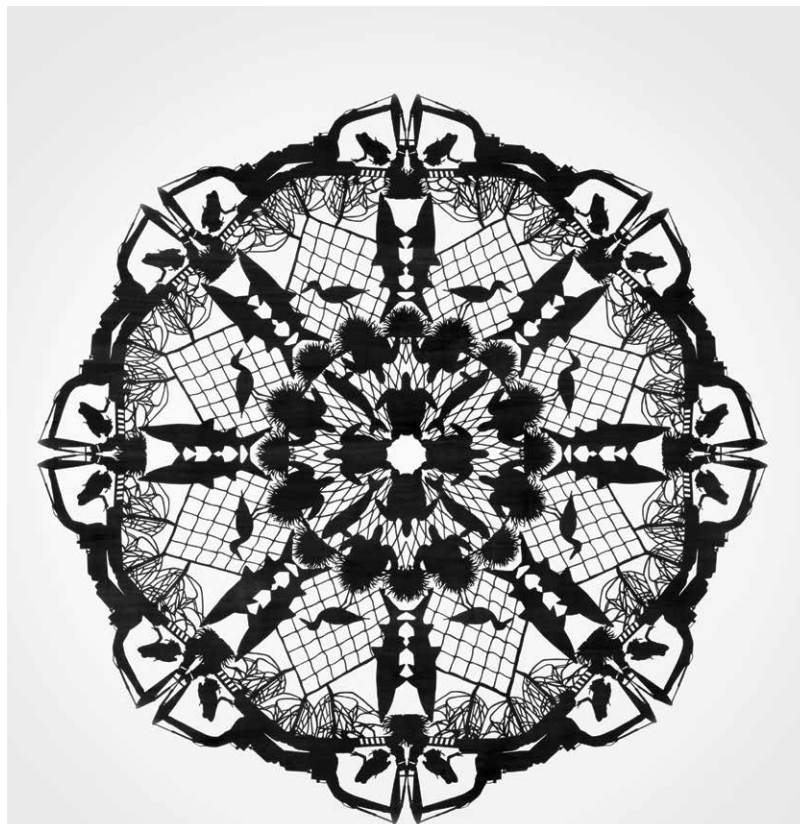
Admission free

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gallery@redland.qld.gov.au

www.more2redlands.com.au/ArtGallery



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