



|Specimen|
|Vanishing Point 3|



|Specimen|

Vic McEwan

An outdoor installation in collaboration with a living landscape



Image: Vic McEwan



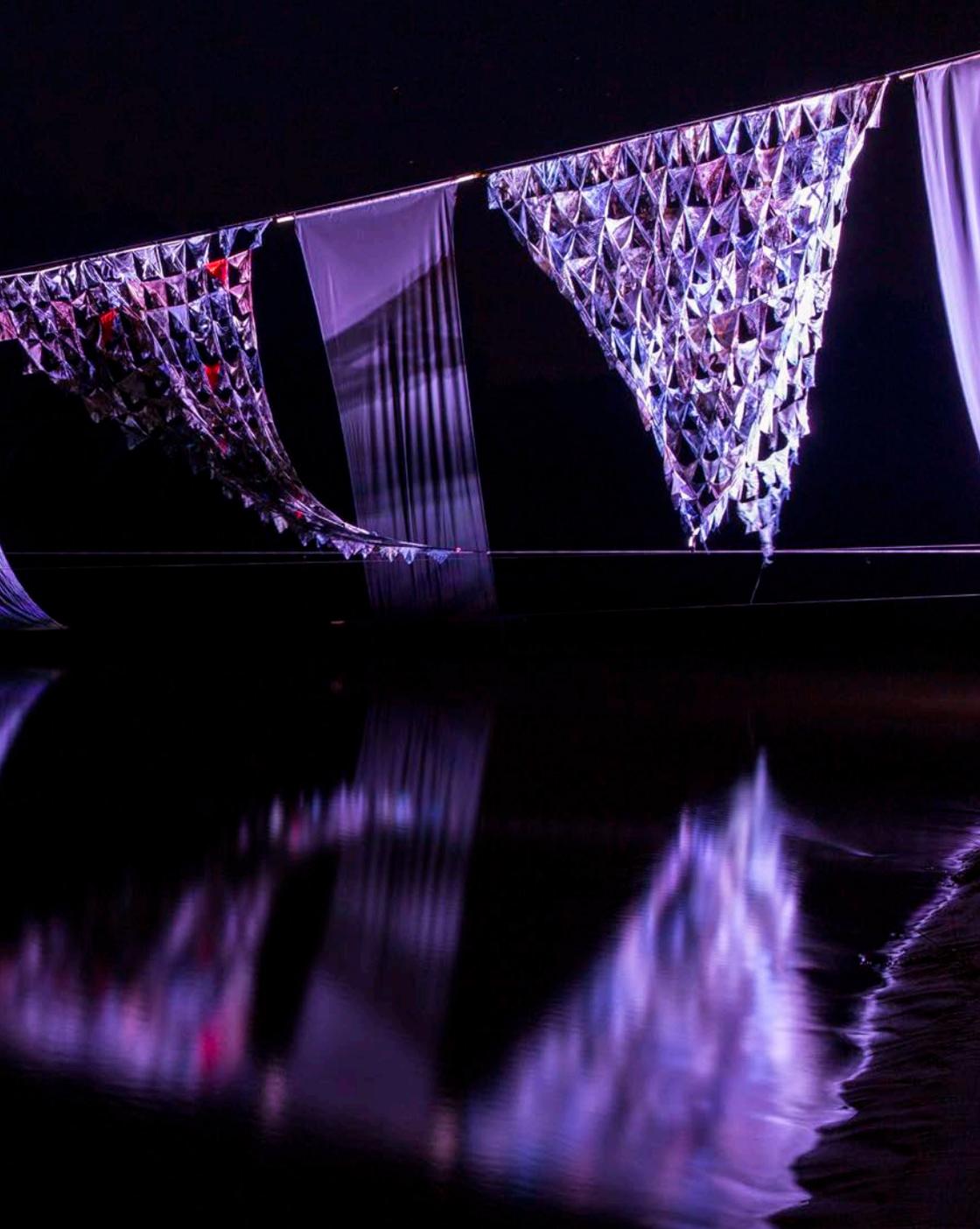
|Vanishing Point 3|

Julie Montgarrett - Textiles

Vic McEwan & Julie Montgarrett - Light Boxes

Installation - Clytie Smith

A large scale outdoor textile installation



Vanishing Point: Swan Hoppers Legacy, 2015
Image: James Farley

|Specimen|

Vic McEwan

Viewing the Australian Institute of Anatomy collection, thousands of specimens of Australian fauna, their body parts preserved in fluid, and boxes of bones, is a somewhat ethereal experience, despite its practical scientific origin and purpose.

Items such as dismembered heads, spinal cord, brains, eyeballs, fetuses and more, are easily recognisable. Then there are the more abstract slithers and slices--an echidna's oesophagus, a kangaroo's gall bladder--which look like objects of fantasy, recalling images of opera singers, strange lands and ghost like creatures.

So what does it mean to look upon these specimens? What connection do we feel as humans? Australian

environmental philosopher Val Plumwood suggests that our current environmental crises are the result of a western worldview that proclaims human beings as radically different from and separated from nature. So with that in mind, what is our relation to these specimens, preserved for so long in jars of toxic formaldehyde?

Animals equal food source, companionship, sport for hunting, subjects to study in documentaries. As specimens, their purpose was to benefit medical advancement through Comparative Anatomy--the comparison of different tissue, bone, muscular systems of animals--in order to learn and develop new treatments and advances in healing for human bodies.

In the Australian Institute of Anatomy collection, the most renowned of these advancements rose from the study of the koala shoulder specimen. Thought

to be stronger than the human shoulder, the structure of the specimen became central to advancing healing techniques for shoulder injuries in humans.

Specimen is a project that takes objects from the Australian Institute of Anatomy collection at the National Museum of Australia and projects them back onto the landscape. These specimens have very little recorded information about their origins, such as where or how they were collected. They are objects frozen in time. These specimens are all of species that have been heavily impacted upon by human endeavour. By returning them to the landscape, are we able to gain any greater understanding, or at least pause for a minute, to consider our impact and also our connection to our natural environment and the specimens themselves.

On the banks of the gently flowing Macquarie River

You are the animal

You are the spark

You are the pollution

You are the sinking boat

You are the tear

You are the injustice

You are the celebration

You are the observation

You are the reaction

You are the doubt

You are the inaction

You are the fog

You are the specimen

|Vanishing Point 3|

Julie Montgarrett

Vanishing Point

3 brings to Artlands Dubbo, the third version of this large scale textile installation originally made to span the Murrumbidgee River on the Commons, Narrandera in 2015. This work was commissioned by the CAD Factory for On Common Ground in 2015, as a response to Dame Mary Gilmore's Swan Hoppers poem about the wilful destruction, to the point of extinction, of black swan eggs and nests all along the Murrumbidgee River system in the nineteenth century. The Swan Hopper story is emblematic of the devastating impact of British colonisation on the fragile ecologies of the Australian continent. It is re-told through this work to address historian Robert Bollard's observation that 'we are a nation with little

regard for its own history'.¹ This installation remade specifically for Dubbo, refers to the selective amnesia that shapes long-standing Australian habits of remembering and forgetting the legacies of our collective histories of colonisation.²

Our inherited attitudes to the natural world, fold onto the present and underpin contemporary attitudes and cultural relationships to country. These expectations, forged in the past in heroic settle mythologies and assumptions of false human entitlement for growth at all costs, are unsustainable requiring the exploitation of natural ecologies to

1 Robert Bollard, (2013) *In The Shadow of Gallipoli: The Hidden History of Australia in World War One*, New South Publishing, Sydney, p. 29

2 Ann Curthoys, *Disputing National Histories: Some Recent Australian Debates. Transforming Cultures* ejournal, Vol.1,

No.1, March 2006. <http://epress.lb.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>

the vanishing point of extinction. This work is based upon these legacies we carry from the past and the new legacies we are shaping in the present that we will leave for future generations in respect of material culture, genetic traces and environmental degradation. We must remember that we have a great responsibility to be custodians of country.

This textile installation is constructed from remnants of cloth from the domestic realm discarded as part of the relentless cycles of Western fashions that demand continual change. Its' industrially designed patterns are a stylised homage to the beauty of the natural world yet their manufacture, that devours vast resources most especially water, was central to the destruction of the same exquisite order in the fragile landscapes that sustain us. The cloth carries the colours and histories of the black swans and other birds that once filled similar

spaces above the rivers across south-east Australia in their millions before the determined destruction by Swan Hoppers and later, the relentless demands for resources of industrial scale development. This textile points to many things most especially to the unseen energies and sounds of this place. By day, it is animated momentarily by the dappled shadows, wind and light in a series of cave-like spaces we can enter or rest beneath. At night other layers of change and temporary alignments are revealed. Hovering above are images of fragile anatomical specimens from the National Museum Collection related to works in the *Specimen* project video and audio work. Traces and echoes of these once living beings can be found amongst the folds and patterns of the cloth suspended below.

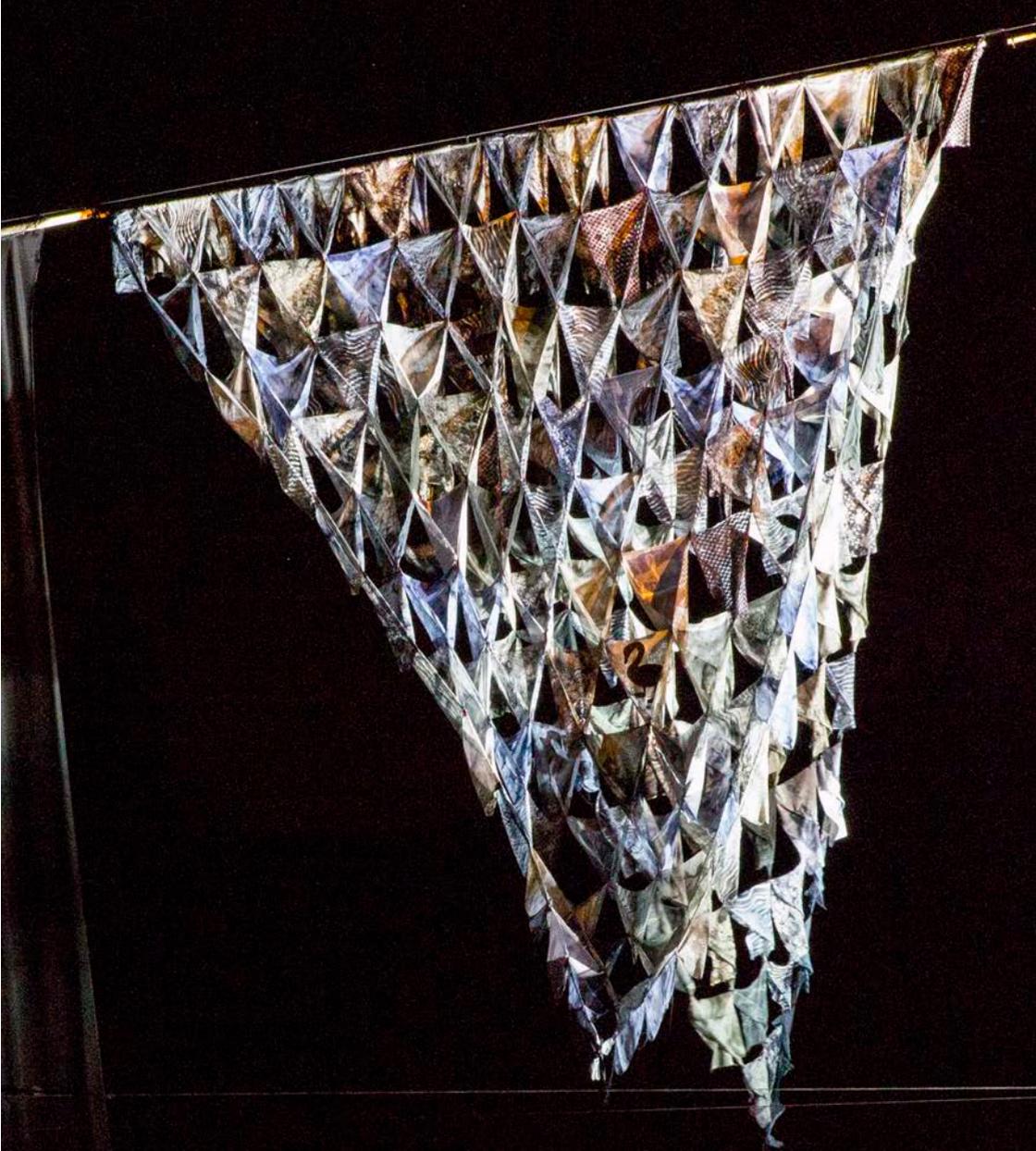
Standing beneath this work, enclosed in the fragile breathing walls we might test the ageless

universal human pleasure of caves and cocoon-like refuges as spaces of protection and reflection for imagination that we have sought since childhood. These spaces welcome us to consider and imagine what is both overlooked and lost, enfolding fleeting narratives with motifs and patterns of presence and absence; repair and resilience. *Vanishing Point 3* offers spaces for thought, hosting memories of all the once abundant creatures of this river country nested between grass and sky to reconsider the tired settler mythologies of simplistic binary opposites of man versus nature.

The fragments and geometry of each piece of cloth refers to the building blocks and logic of complex fluid ecologies. It is imprinted with the rhythms and traces of water, of creatures still present and of many now absent. There are textures and shadows of growth and patterns of intricate natural order and

the sediments and energies of life. Look closely and you will see remnants of history in tree stumps of clear felling, specimens of anatomy, aerial maps of land management, ropes, knots and traces of the layers of histories too often wilfully erased.

The textile is as tenuous and fragile as the river and our country's own survival – the resilience of both is strained to breaking point.



Vanishing Point: Swan Hoppers Legacy (detail), 2015
Image: James Farley

Materiality, Agency and History

Vic McEwan

Specimen and *Vanishing Point 3* highlight a world where the non-human is believed to be something that we as humans can reduce, quantify, control and understand; relying on the idea that nature has no agency and no sovereignty in its own right. Humans hegemonic relationship to nature asserts that nature can be reduced to the limited construct of human language (signifier and signified) and that it exists purely within human centric understanding. Therefore, nature exists for its benefit to humans and its value is to be understood in terms of its value to us. As humanity becomes more isolated from nature, the importance of art is to allow humans to see that we are not separate and distinct from it, but instead we exist as a part of nature.

Tens of thousands of years ago, on the walls of caves, prehistoric people painted images of wild animals. At a time when nature dominated humans, it is argued that art was used to understand nature, evidence of primitive humans attempting to have some sort of control over their environment. Different theories exist as to the meaning of these artworks. Were they there for purposes of ritual or ceremony? Were they there to pass on knowledge?

Common to cave paintings around the world is the subject of animals, often rendered in sophisticated detail whilst in these same paintings people were often depicted in simplistic form. It is argued that these detailed renditions of animal form are in fact early attempts by humans to understand and in some way take control of nature, and that the survival of the prehistoric human was aided by this passing on of knowledge.

The neolithic revolution transitioned the hunter gatherer towards a system of agriculture and fixed settlements, of human imposed control over nature. This was the beginning of the structures of society as we know today. Armies were formed, organised religion including a belief in the powers of god to affect agriculture and the destiny of life itself. This also bought about a fundamental change in the nature of art. As cave painting, art was common property, but the neolithic age brought with it private property, religion and art as icon and worship.

Even in the bible, we find the segregation of humankind from nature, placing us in a master relationship over the natural world. "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move

along the ground."¹

During the Enlightenment the individual, rather than God, was raised to the centre of the modern world, "the genius of man, the unique and extraordinary ability of the human mind"² which although focusing importance on the earthly reality of life still meant a conquest over nature.

Recently, critical thought has experienced the emergence of many strands of thinking that understands the non-human world (i.e nature) in a relationship that is not separate from humans. New Materialism, Object Orientated Ontologies, Speculative Realism and Vibrant Matter, all propose systems of thought which value the non-human and critique the nature/culture binary.

1 King James Bible, Genesis 1:16

2 Gianozzo Manetti, *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man*, cited in Clare, J., Italian Renaissance.

*In terms of the various Fronts for materialism, realism and non-humans, what they seem to agree on is that the politics of the symbolic, representation and signification have ended up in a deadend situation, being able to talk of humans and of nature/ Ecology/non- humans only as far as they are incorporated into the symbolic/power structures of human interests.*³

Val Plumwood explored the man/nature hyperseparation as outlined by Deborah Rose Bird in her Val Plumwood memorial lecture: “One of Val’s key concepts was ‘hyperseparation’—the structure of dominance that drives western binaries, including nature/culture, female/male, matter/mind, savage/civilised.

³ “New Materialism and Non-Humanisation, an Interview with Jussi Parikka” by Michael Dieter. Published in the Speculative Realities ebook. <http://v2.nl/archive/articles/new-materialism-and-non-200bhumanisation>

The hyperseparation structure accords value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other side to a position of oppositional subordination”.⁴

The essence of this thinking about human and nature isn’t exactly new, indigenous people have understood for a long time this connection of people to nature and the very materiality of the landscape and their intra-connected relationship with it. The history of Critical Theory, although far removed from indigenous understanding of these complex relationships, hasn’t been devoid of considerations of nature. Francis Bacon may have argued for the need for human beings to control nature in order to have power over it but some theorists were able to connect nature to the direct needs of humans.

Hiedigger suggested that there are three ailments

⁴ <http://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol3/3.5.pdf>

of the human soul. Firstly, that we have forgotten that we are alive. Secondly, that nature is seen as a means rather than an ends and that we forget that we are united though our common being with everything that exists. Thirdly, we forget to be free and live for ourselves. In saying this, Heidegger reminds us that through neglecting our connection to nature, we are neglecting ourselves, our own well being.⁵

Others, such as Kant, amongst his diverse views, saw nature as the great leveller, holding within it the power to draw together the commonality of all people “the graceful flight of a bird can be loved by both a prince and a peasant.”

Joshua Reynolds believed that the old masters had achieved perfection and the job of the artist was to replicate and learn from this perfection. “A mere
5 <http://thephilosophersmail.com/perspective/the-great-philosophers-10-martin-heidegger/>

copier of nature can never produce anything great, can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator.” Reynolds however believed that understanding the old masters was necessary to draw an image of an ideal nature, “not showing the visible trappings of nature, the disfigured mess, but search for something under the surface, the ideal nature, the divine form of perfection”.⁶

Post Modernism proposed that there is significance in what lies beyond ourselves, suggesting that human kind isn't the most valuable thing in the universe. Since then we have developed concepts that have allowed us to consider that the meaning of nature lies beyond simple images of pretty scenery or human triumph in the romanticised taming of a vast land by colonising people. Instead we are now able to view the

6 Joshua Reynolds, *Critical Theory Since Plato*, p 343

world as non-binary, beyond a nature/human divide.

“Everything is vibrant matter, including people.”⁷

Seeing nature not just as sites of human endeavour, artistic production, aesthetic experience, development or even political action but as sites that are at the same time within and beyond human understanding.

If we only understand nature in terms of its separation from and its ability to serve human kind, in this complex age of climate change and economic rationalism, what is to become of this relationship? What will happen to nature once it becomes less profitable than the land it inhabits?

“Nature has often been seen to lie outside culture, as an absolute and a given, as a hard, physical, earthy, empirical reality against which culture defines itself. This view of nature has enabled

⁷ In Conversation with George Main, Curator National Museum of Australia.

historians to use it as a steady and colourful backdrop to human action.”⁸

As humanity becomes more isolated from nature, nature could be considered to be a refugee from earth, merely something that we tolerate, ignorant to the fact that within nature is the whole journey of the existence of humans and non-humans. Instead of understanding and participating in our support networks of flora and fauna and the complexities of nature, we are forced to create nature reserves which can be seen as a sign that man has to be separated from nature in order for it to survive.

And just as we segregate nature off into reserves, we also have a history of segregation of indigenous people, onto missions and reserves and sometimes even worse. Isolating a people who understand direct relationship to

⁸ <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-December-2007/EcoHumanities/EcoGriffiths.html>

the materiality of their interconnected natural world through their daily existence as well as through their art making.

Man continues to isolate “The Other’ under a construct of protecting it, rather than admonishing ourselves for the very fact that we have to protect it from ourselves. “We are evolutionary beings made mostly of water and related viscerally and chemically to the whole natural history of the universe. Family history - across deep time - becomes natural history”.⁹

Marxist philosophy questions the ability for man to connect to nature during the industrial age.

Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped greek imagination and greek art possible in the age of automatic machinery, and railways and electric telegraphs? All mythology masters and

9 *ibid*

*dominates and shapes the forces of nature in and through the imagination. Hence it disappears after man gains mastery over the forces of nature. In no event could greek art exist in a society which excludes any mythological attitude towards it. and which requires from the artist an imagination free from mythology.*¹⁰

Naturally we can consider that the industrial revolution built on the control of nature is based on a separation from an understanding of nature and our place within it. However Antoine de Saint Exupéry argued that, “the machine does not isolate man from the great problems of nature but plunges him more deeply into them”.¹¹ Perhaps foreseeing a time when the effects of human endeavour must force man to consider its consequence.

10 *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Marxism, p 626

11 Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Wind Sand and Start*, 1939

Nature does not just contain beauty or attempts at perfection, or monotony as Oscar Wilde suggested in his play *The Decay of Lying*, but is in fact a chaotic and violent ever changing and living set of entanglements. “The old idea of ‘the balance of nature’, of ecological equilibrium, has been discarded. ‘Disturbance’ is now found to be endemic in natural systems; it is not rare and external but essential and structural. As anthropologist Deborah Rose puts it, ‘Major ecological change, much of it in crisis, is situated across the nature/culture divide’”.¹²

By presenting *Specimen* as part of a Living Landscape, these objects frozen in time and imbued with the golden glow of formaldehyde, come to life and provide a moment to consider our own connections, impacts and consequences.

¹² <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-December-2007/EcoHumanities/EcoGriffiths.html>

Image: Vic McEwan



• KOALA •

Thank you: Pat McKenzie, Tim Crutchett, Peter Papandrea,
Artlands Dubbo and the National Museum of Australia

Presented as part of Artlands Dubbo, 28 and 29 October 2016

