

Yenda Rain

Vic McEwan





Yenda, 13 March 2012
Image taken from the Rural & Distance Education NSW website

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Cover Image: *Fish Rider* projection at Yenda Memorial Park, 9 November 2013
Original Fish Rider Image: Hape Kiddle

What is Yenda Rain?

THROUGHOUT 2013, Riverina artist Vic McEwan worked with the community of Yenda and the Griffith Regional Art Gallery to explore how a town recovers from flood disaster. This project was a major commitment to the town of Yenda and to examining the impact the arts can have in dealing with community issues.

McEwan spent time with many different groups within the community, hearing their stories, running workshops and learning about the many challenges, the shared stories and the unique ones as well.

As 2013 unfolded and Vic explored the multifaceted experiences in Yenda, he compiled his thoughts and observations into a series of major artworks that were presented on site in public spaces within the town of Yenda.

These works are now being presented in a gallery space in order to share some of the process and reasons behind what he was trying to achieve. This gallery exhibition is an opportunity to reflect on the role that the arts have to play within our functioning and recovering communities.

Yenda Rain: A Night of Video Projections and Sound in Yenda Memorial Park and the Water Towers,
9 November 2013

Yenda Rain: Gallery Exhibition at Griffith Regional Art Gallery,
27 February - 30 March 2014

From the Gallery

THE role of a regional art gallery is many things. It's a place where arts practice can be seen through exhibition, created through public programs and discovered through education. It is a place which supports regional artists in their development and provides opportunities for artists to expand in their own practice. Our Gallery is the only regional art gallery between Wagga and Broken Hill attracting visitors from right across Australia.

We are incredibly proud to have been able to work with Vic McEwan from The Cad Factory on Yenda Rain, one of the biggest community arts projects we have been involved in to date. This project was funded through a successful application to Museums and Galleries NSW and was one of only two projects in NSW that were funded. A year in the making and following an amazing delivery of the project in the community of Yenda, we are excited to be able to showcase part of the work within our Gallery.

The works Vic has been creating with various community members through stories, interviews, drawings and sound are beautiful, poetic, magical and represent a broad range of his styles. Collectively each work tells a story of home, place and letting go and is a chance to reflect on the Yenda rains.

Sarah Boon, Griffith Regional Theatre and Art Gallery Manager
Kristy Brown, Gallery Co-ordinator



Yenda Rain: A Night of Video Projection and Sound
Yenda Memorial Park



Yenda Rain: A Night of Video Projection and Sound
Yenda Memorial Park



Yenda Rain: A Night of Video Projection and Sound
Yenda Water Towers

Burning in Water, Drowning in Flames

Clive Parkinson

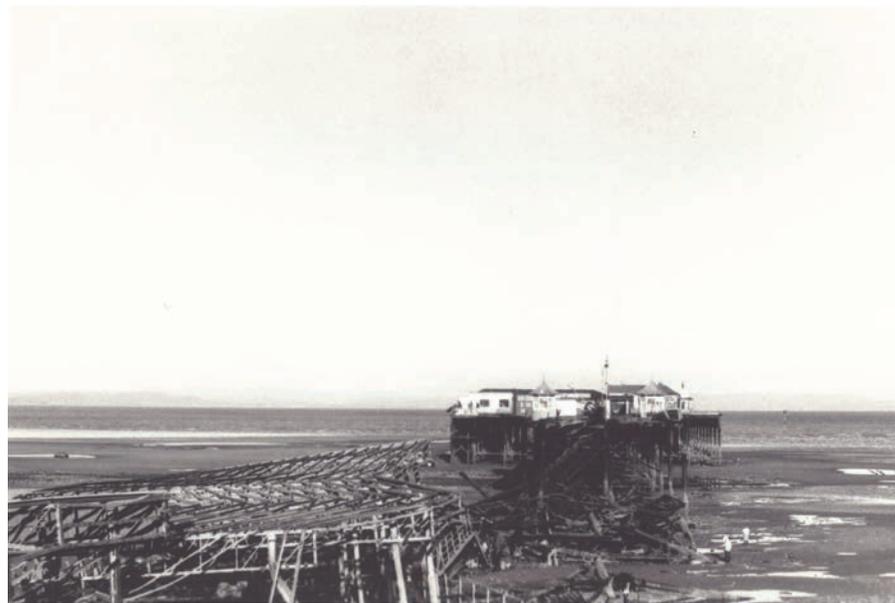
ARRIVING home in the coastal area of North West England after some time in Australia, I was greeted by a tidal swell-surge that stopped me in my tracks and, though predicted, this weather caused considerable hardship, leaving tens of thousands of people without electricity over Christmas. I wonder how these people would have coped if the seasonal extremes hadn't been predicted. I wonder too what place might an artist have had amongst the emergency services.

My early years were spent living by the Irish Sea and, in fact, three times in my life I've experienced something of the devastation of floods. Yet with the passing of time, I worry that my childhood recollections are more fabled distortions of reality, a new fiction that I've created for myself. The experiences of my parents were fundamentally different to my own, my mother only recently reminding me that on one of those occasions we had to leave our home for six weeks while floorboards were re-laid and new wiring was fitted. My only memories of this first flood were of setting sail on upturned tables and searching out new lands.

With the second flood came great foraging on the beach, following a storm which brought the Edwardian pier crashing down into sea and shingle. My recollections are of the fierce competition amongst the locals to salvage slot-machines out of the brine, pockets bulging with loose change and the police looking on in impotent frustration.

Many years later and during the third flood, I lived in rooms overlooking the sea and spent two wonderful days trapped three floors above the waterline as neighbours in flats below were rescued by boatsful of police, to the sounds of exploding electricity meters and a billion spontaneous fires caused by the floods. I was recently in love and this solitude by coal fire and candlelight was perfect. At least, this is my version of events.

Young Clive exploring his flooded street (c 1968)
Below: The West End Pier, Morecambe, November 1977



In November last year, I met Vic McEwan when he shared some of his work with an international conference on arts and health in Sydney. Vic disarmed me. The arts and health community, of which I'm a part, is populated by artists who explicitly want to have an impact on people's health and wellbeing. Vic was doing something subtler than this - and he was doing it with a high level of sophistication. There's always a danger that those of us driven by a desire for public good will produce work where artistic integrity is somehow diluted, but the work that was being shared here had a refined aesthetic, yet was clearly rooted in a community.

Spending time in Australia and meeting Vic took me right back to these events of my youth. I began to question my own faltering memories and this new possibility, that artists could be part of recovery in communities that have experienced trauma.

Looking at a continent battered by extremes of fire and floods, it's easy for a naive outsider to assume these are the signs of global warming. I'm certainly no expert - or a denier - but one can't help feeling that the land has natural cycles which, through extremis, will inevitably force us to question our impact on the earth and the ability of our knowledge systems to predict and cope with events natural and unnatural.

We can always rail against negligent gods, or better still, turn to the new gods of science for all manner of technological solutions. But clues might already exist to some deeper knowledge - the fading memories of indigenous custodians of the land - and the everyday - the miracles of trees that blossom following the worst fires and the emergence of life from the ashes. Neither divine, nor a technological marvel, but the numinous daily magnificence of evolution and chance.

The failings involved in not predicting or stemming the flood in Yenda may say more about negligent systems and warn us that the cycles of our planet, whilst being to some degree predictable, offer us a warning against complacency, bureaucracy and environmental abuse.

So, what is the place of art and culture in all of this and, in particular, the idea of arts and health somehow being conjoined? McEwan and the unfolding work in Yenda, however, show us that the hallowed world of contemporary art needn't be the sole preserve of the great and the good - or worse still, purely for the gallery-going elite, following the latest market trend and oblivious to their myopic consumption of trend, mediated and corralled by curators and critics alike.

Contemporary art can and should be risky and provocative - but in being so, it runs the risk of alienating those who aren't in the know and - as with health and wellbeing - those of us with the least resources, less educational opportunity and lowest income are left bewildered, unequal and, in all probability, resistant to art's pretensions.

The floods came and washed away houses and livelihoods, so what on earth can contemporary artists offer a traumatised community? Of course, in the crisis itself, it's the resources to save life and limb that are most important; the emergency services and provision of basic human needs. But beyond that functional support, how do people make sense of what has happened to them? I'd argue that - filling the place of the priest and doctor who offer prescriptions to the disillusioned for everyday maladies - the artist offers a different kind of alchemy and the materials they turn to virtual gold are of different stuff altogether.

Artists work with diverse materials to create the sensate and the challenging - the light, the sound and the story - but most potently in the case of wellbeing, people. Herein lies a value that exists beyond monetary terms, and while arts administrators bandy around expressions like cultural capital, cultural impact and cultural value, it is the very essence of human engagement and interaction - the coming together of people who would never describe themselves as artists - that is the real value. Beyond measurement.

Artists are not shamans or tricksters, and not everyone might want to get involved with them (I know there are art forms that fill me with horror!). But it's dangerous stuff, this alchemy, and these artists offer a currency far richer than some coins washed up on a desolate northern beach - they offer us all a taste of life beyond our individual and narrow mindsets, they offer us a chance to be part of something bigger than our frail and transient individual selves, maybe they even offer us a sense of community. But here's the potentially dangerous bit - they might also offer us a voice. Whether it's self-determination or practical solutions to political, environmental or social change, art opens doors and enables the imagination to flourish.

In the here and now of trauma, artists offer us a fresh look at our realities and, occasionally, the potential to think differently. These artists aren't dressed up in the trappings of medicine or religion and their work isn't concerned with placebo. Their work is about solidarity in the face of extremes, about reimagining community.

McEwan asks us, what does home mean, and while the great flat screen TV and the all-singing-and-dancing computerised

vacuum cleaners, phones and gizmos offer illusions of an easier life, if these things are taken away from us, we can quite easily survive. If we lose people and livelihoods, that is altogether a bleaker prospect. But what of the photographs and videos, the letters, drawings and ephemera that surround us and that we take for granted. What happens when they are lost? Where are those prompts to memory and reminders of a billion moments in our lives? Through conversation and experimentation, McEwan's work offers opportunities to reimagine what communities really are in the face of loss - changing mindsets, forging new friendships and perhaps creating new cultural traditions.

Could we describe this work as Arts and Health? I think we could, but why reduce it when it is so expansive? It is sublime participatory contemporary art that is grounded in community. Vic McEwan's work is poetic and expansive and testament to the value of contemporary art in unexpected settings and contexts. Unlike some war artist dragged in simply to record the facts, his work contracts and expands with the community.

Music from data, stories from water - this is not a work of crisis management or salvage, it's a work of cohesion, a bridging of fractured lives and inevitably an act that imbues communal wellbeing, allowing space for anger, fear and frustration but also, critically, celebration, flux and change.

Clive Parkinson is the Director of Arts for Health at Manchester Metropolitan University and a passionate advocate for culture and the arts. Through facilitated networking, practical support, training on the ground and political lobbying, he has succeeded in gaining strategic support and a greater understanding of the potency of the arts in the UK and internationally. His current research explores the relationship between the visual arts and dementia and he is working on a number of European projects related to arts and health research, policy and practice. He is a director of the National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing.

Artworks

The Everything Shop

The streets of Yenda are lined with a variety of empty spaces. Some have stood silent for a long time, others were abandoned due to the floods.

For this part of the *Yenda Rain* project, McEwan worked with a group of students from Yenda Public School to re-imagine these empty spaces.

“What if this empty building could be anything that you could dream of?” was the question put towards the students.

The process was a long one over two terms.

To create this video projection installation, the workshop commenced not with art making in the traditional sense but instead with lots of talking. Conversations happened about a variety of subjects that all had to do with “place”.

What happens to a town when its shops remain empty?

What do kids daydream about when they see empty spaces?

What are the places around town that have personal significance?

The students were active contributors to all of these discussions and talked freely together.

After these conversations were had and personal stories were shared, the group set about creating a series of drawings and narrative for a video projection to appear in the windows of one of the abandoned shops. Scripts were written and the audience experience was discussed through processes that promote discussion, team building and negotiation.

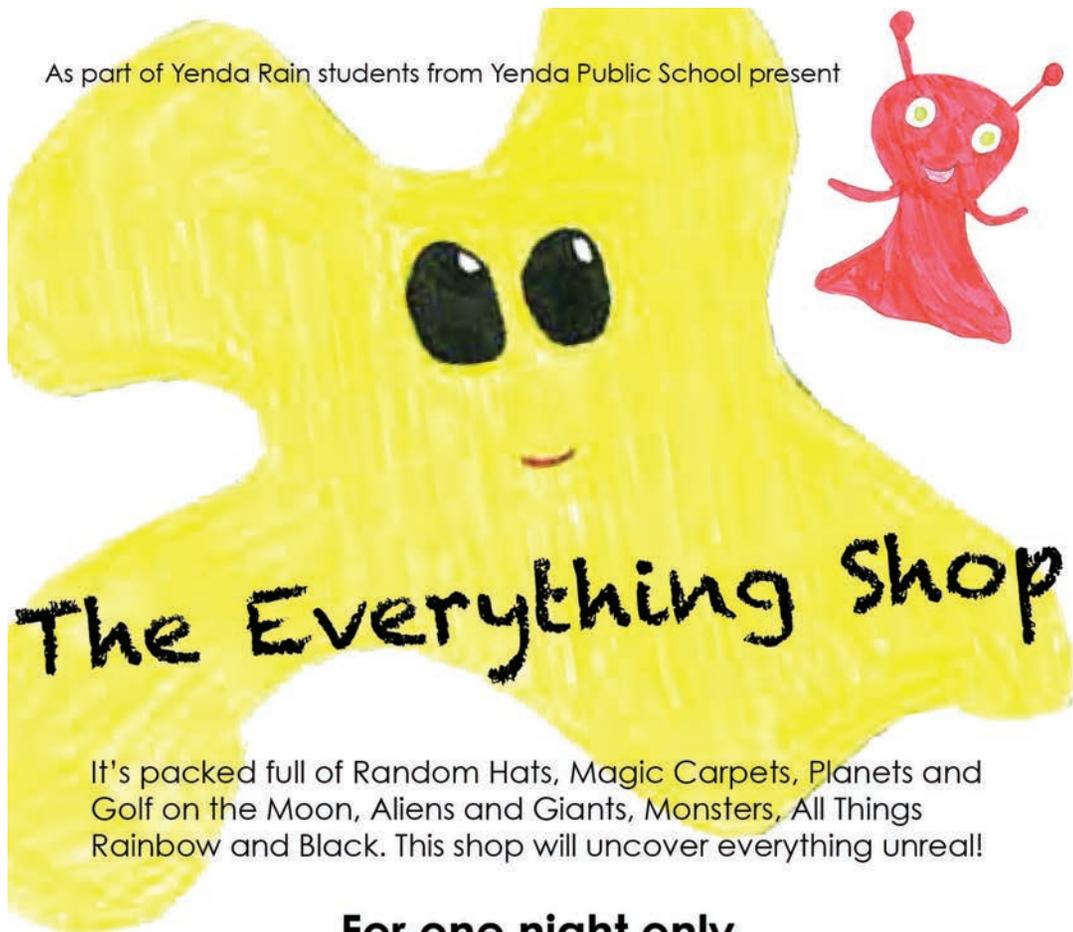
On the night of the *Yenda Rain* event, just after the sun went down, the shop came to life with the projections that the students made. People rushed over to see what was happening and the kids stood centre stage, proud and excited to see their creation come to life.

The Everything Shop was a place that sold a range of products, from Aliens to Monsters, Magic hats and more. It was a shop filled with possibilities and encouraged dreaming and whimsy within our functional but non-functioning spaces.



Collaborating Students: Chloe Perez, Sophie Millis,
Sophie Torresan, Jack Gilbert, Tyler Patten, Arora
Kiddle, Chelsea Twigg.

As part of Yenda Rain students from Yenda Public School present



It's packed full of Random Hats, Magic Carpets, Planets and Golf on the Moon, Aliens and Giants, Monsters, All Things Rainbow and Black. This shop will uncover everything unreal!

**For one night only
You wouldn't want to miss it. Be there!**

Saturday 9 November from sunset onwards
Yenda Place, Yenda





The Everything Shop projections in an empty shop
opposite Yenda Memorial Park

Bonfire

If you look back through McEwan's artistic practice, there is an emerging theme of large scale, practical objects being used to tell stories of emotion, of daydreaming and of whimsy.

The large water towers that you see from a distance as you drive in to Yenda are a piece of infrastructure owned by Griffith City Council. As an artwork, they act as a surface for video projection and an opportunity for a town to reflect.

On November 9th 2013 as the night sky arrived, it brought with it a 30 meter tall roaring bonfire projected onto the water towers. Slowly, over time, different words drifted down from the top of the tower to be burnt away in the fire below.

Words like Regret, Fear and Anger.

McEwan collected these words by asking Yenda residents one simple question, "If you could let go, or get rid of one thing in your life, what would it be?"

A compelling and thoughtful list of words was collected from community members ranging from school students to senior citizens. During the public outcome of *Yenda Rain*, these words were burnt away, slowly appearing, descending and quickly being burnt in the fire.

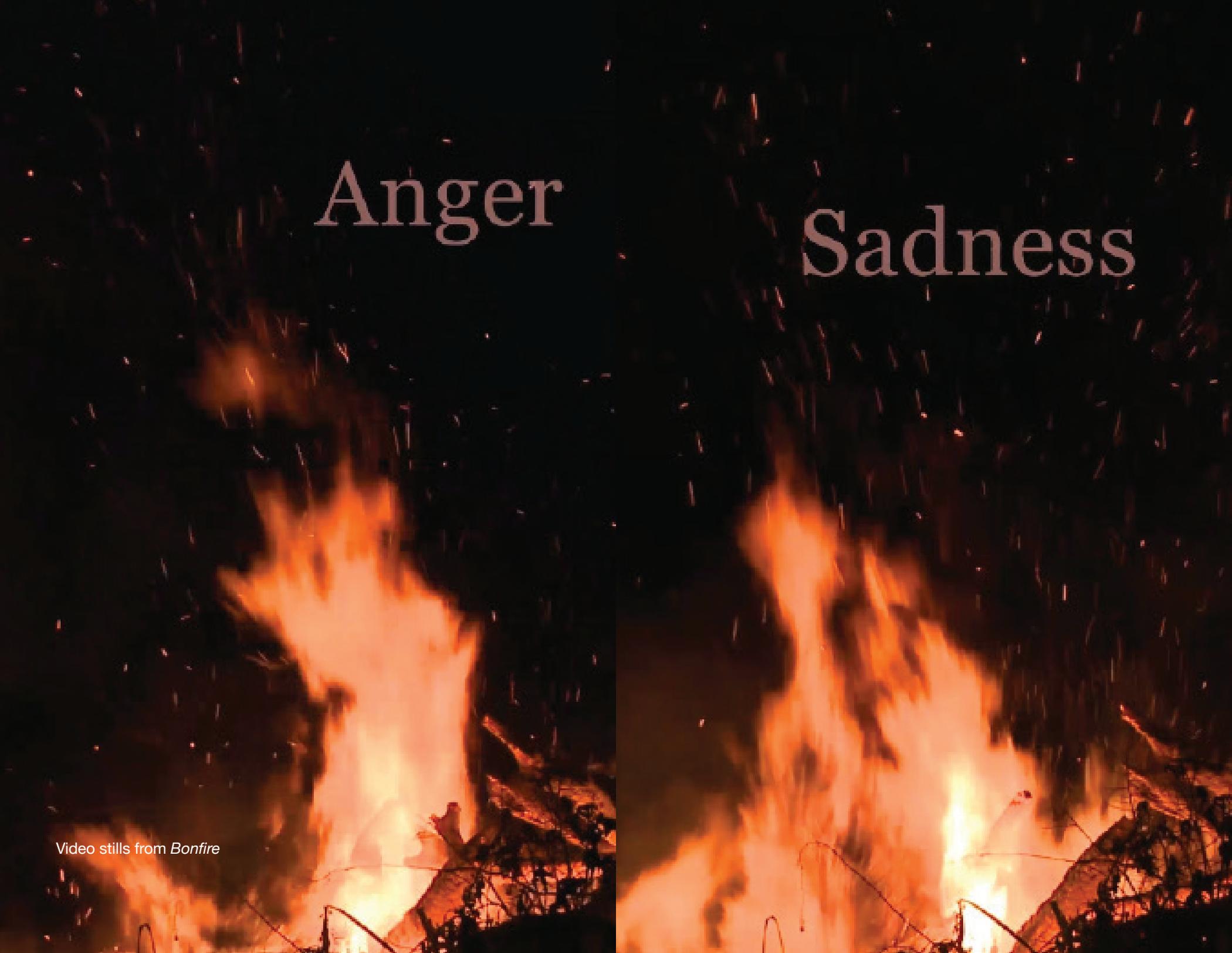
Fire is a symbol of regeneration and renewal and this artwork was intended to create a moment of reflection for all community members to share together and individually.

As the things that people wanted to move on from were all symbolically burnt away in the fire, people gathered, silently. Some people stared at the projections for close to an hour. The slow descent of each word provided a moment of reflection for the entire town.

This artwork doesn't have the capacity to heal all of these emotions, but the intention was to create an opportunity for community expression and to act as a catalyst for future conversations.



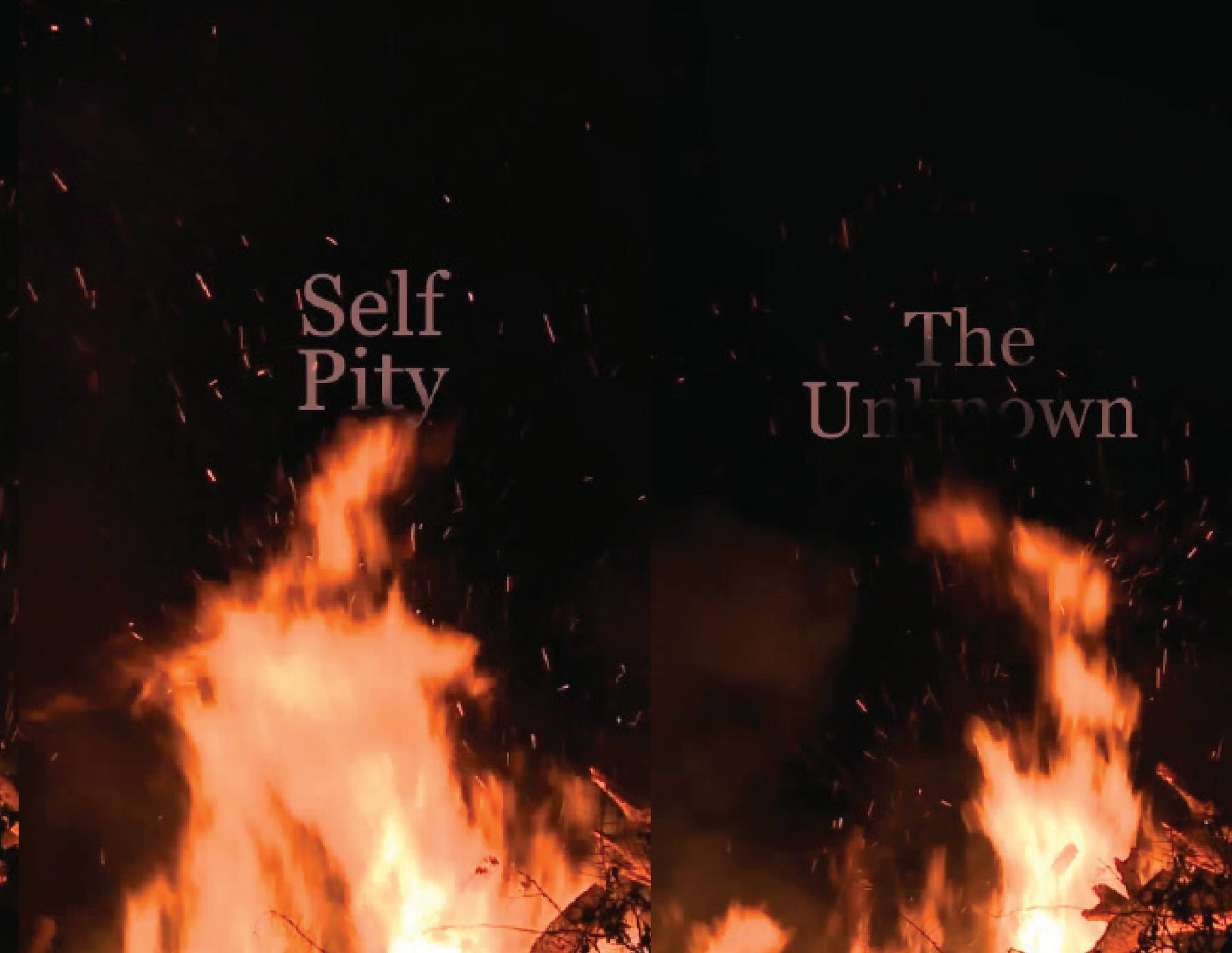
Bonfire projection on the Water Tower



Anger

Sadness

Video stills from *Bonfire*



Self
Pity

The
Unknown

Fish Rider

Fish Rider is an image created by Yenda artist Hape Kiddle. It has appeared in several carvings and dreamings by Kiddle throughout the years.

At the time when the water broke in Yenda, there were kids holding large carp up above their head as they walked down the street. Fish Rider is a return to the childlike, the dream. It is not about the practical lived experience.

For *Yenda Rain*, this image was projected onto the sand on the grounds of the local playground. A projector was strapped to the front of a cherry picker and raised 12 meters in the air to allow a small, 1 meter wide version of the Fish Rider to slowly “swim” around the sand below.

Accompanying the image was music created by a process which McEwan calls “Site Specific Composition”. It was created in a way that sits in direct opposition to the essence of Kiddle’s *Fish Rider*. The composition was created from the practical, from lived experiences and from issues of time and money.

During McEwan’s time in Yenda, residents filled out a survey about their experiences which asked questions such as, What was the estimated financial damage to your home? How long where you evacuated from your home? How long where you off work? How many people were living in your house at the time? Each question had a multiple choice answer and without participants knowing it, McEwan had assigned each answer to correspond with a note in the key of F# Major.

If someone selected answer 1, it was transcribed to the note F#, if they selected answer two, it was G# and so on. From these transcribed notes, Vic worked with Yenda musician Jared Bianchini who played this composition on saxophone.

The composition reframed the practical experiences of the flood into a floaty, dreamy piece of music that could only exist in Yenda and be made from Yenda’s experiences.

The key of F# Major was chosen due to its emotional qualities which is said to be the key that represents triumph over adversity.

The music was played throughout the park and on the streets of Yenda during the evening to accompany the *Fish Rider* projections on the sand. Kids jumped in the sand, hugged, tackled and talked to the *Fish Rider* image as it slowly swam around the park.



Fish Rider in Yenda Memorial Park



Fish Rider detail

The Grapevine Trio

Music is everywhere, hidden within all manner of infrastructure and practical item. This Grape Vine video was about using the core practical component of a business, in this case the grapevine in a functioning vineyard, to extract something unexpected and enchanting.

When McEwan arrived for a 6 week stint staying at the Bianchini Vineyard in their cottage, he noticed that the vines all played different notes when he plucked them. This was the catalyst for The Grapevine Trio.

Within 24 hours, McEwan formed a band for one night only. Jared Bianchini played Tenor Saxophone, Sarah McEwan played drums while McEwan played the grapevine. The group improvised for 45 minutes one evening as the whole family sat and watched the performance.

The resulting video work is a short extract of the evening. In essence it was both a performance and the chance to create a video work that celebrated beauty in unexpected places.

Filming and Editng - Darrin Baker

Lighting and Audio Tracking - Cheyne Halloran and Mitch Maninac



The Grapevine Trio improvised performance at the
Bianchini Vineyard on 7 October 2013

The Force

During the interview process with local residents, McEwan collated a series of responses about varied experiences and viewpoints. These were crafted into a piece of poetry and set to a video of the Yenda Blue Heelers, the local Rugby team, running towards the camera.

The background music is a composition that sounds like several flutes but was in actual fact a clothesline being played by the wind. This was discovered one afternoon in a Yenda backyard.

Following is the narration of the video.

Stories spread quickly, of a giant force, a wave charging towards town about to wash over us all. It wasn't meant to happen, an unnatural disaster, unexpected with no time to plan and no time to prepare.

Some people left for work that ordinary morning, thinking about preparing their family meals that night. By afternoon it was text messages saying, "the town was evacuated, you can't return," and the task turned to planning where to stay, how to find out more information, how to find out about friends and family.

In those first few months that followed, for those who returned, it was very quiet in the town, eerie. For 12 months it was like a ghost town. It's been a long haul.

Some people were wondering if their glass was half full or half empty. The glass was overflowing, then empty and so now we are trying to figure it all out.

There has been a lot of anger but we have grown closer since the floods, it has made us more of a community that does really care for each other and now at least the majority of homes look like new.

Let's plan, let's talk, let's share our experiences so we can all understand what happened and make sure it doesn't happen this way again. Let's harness this fantastic community spirit in Yenda; despite the long term impacts, Yenda feels safe as people look out for each other more now and they make an effort to connect to each other. But now we have higher insurance premiums; a burden that has a very real impact on the lives of many.

Slowly the happy little town is being rebuilt and as that process continues the spirit of the townsfolk is returning. Challenging, heartbreaking, isolating but as time moves forward it feels more like a renewal, a chance to start afresh and move forward bigger and better than before, thankful that we have family and friends.

There is still a sadness surrounding the town. People say that there was no fatalities from the floods but some of us don't agree. There were some elderly residents who seemed to give up after the floods, after losing their home, their memories, their histories. These unnoticed victims of this unnatural disaster.

I think overall we have come together as a whole. People who were once strangers now stop and talk to each other.

Did this really happen? I was there, but until this day, it still feels so unbelievable.



Yenda Blue Heelers

Yenda Documentary

Early on in the process of creating *Yenda Rain*, the realisation that there were so many important stories to share made McEwan realise that a documentary could be another platform for exploring the complex issue of the disaster. McEwan negotiated with film maker Darrin Baker to follow the journey throughout the year to trace the progress and to hear peoples' stories, their concerns and triumphs. The documentary also explores the impact that the arts can have in working with communities recovering from trauma.

Documentary Overview

“The documentary, “Yenda: The Gentle Flood” is a half hour film following the journey Narrandera artist Vic McEwan takes as he works alongside residents of Yenda, a small country town 20 minutes from Griffith. The town was inundated with water from the MIA during the floods of March 2012, causing great anger and frustration amongst the local population. Vic, who has worked with local communities as an artist on a number of occasions, sets out to work closely with the community over a ten month period as a way of helping the townsfolk comes to terms with their grief, anger and loss, and to look once again toward the future.

The film maker, Darrin Baker, follows Vic's and the town's journey over this period. The documentary also investigates the role of art and artists in a local community, and looks at how artists can come from “the outside” and make a contribution to the social and psychological well-being of a small town.”



Film maker Darrin Baker

About Vic McEwan

Vic McEwan is an interdisciplinary sound, projection and installation artist who works as a composer, performer, producer and director. He is interested in landscape, communities, remote spaces and cross art form collaboration.

McEwan creates sound for theatre, dance, and performance art and conceives, creates and directs large scale site specific collaborations that often involve dance, projection, installation and sound.

McEwan is interested in creating arts partnerships with non arts sectors including the health sector, business, museums, environmental and community sectors. The marriage of high level contemporary arts practice with these sectors is at the forefront of his practice.

McEwan founded The Cad Factory, an artist run company for which he is the current Artistic Director. He has led The Cad Factory into being recognised Nationally for it's innovation and integrity.

McEwan's main focus as the Artistic Director of The Cad Factory is to utilise the unique spaces and infrastructure in regional Australia to tell community and individual stories. He is interested in the re-imagining of the landscape in a region consumed by industrialised agricultural practices that reduce the landscape to a place of function rather than a place which creates community memories. Vic's projects attempt to provoke memory making into our landscape.

The Cad Factory has an excellent reputation for developing outstanding cross disciplinary contemporary arts projects in regional NSW and beyond.

Brianna Munting, Deputy Director, NAVA 2013

...a vibrant cultural organisation that is presenting an impressive program.

Gail Priest, RealTime Magazine 2013

Vic approaches each new project with consideration for the place, the people and how the project might be used to enrich the social fabric of the community.

Lindy Allen, Director, Regional Arts Australia 2014

www.vicmcewan.com

www.cadfactory.com

Acknowledgments

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The Residents of Yenda who have participated or even just wished the project well

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Griffith Council

Hape Kiddle & family

Yenda Public School

John and Wendy Bianchini

Mitch, Judy, Candice, Jared, Thea, Tye, Gizzo, Stiger and Greech Bianchini

The Yenda Progress Association

Griffith Connections

Regional Development Australia: Riverina

Museums and Galleries NSW

Sarah McEwan

Darrin Baker

Blake Buckley and Sophie Joyce

Centre for Creative Arts, Latrobe University

Yenda Blue Heelers

Western Riverina Arts

Yenda Rotary

Richie Hallal & Angela Frost

John Matkovic & Erik Renno

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Griffith Child Care Centre Inc.

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GAD
factory**

dynamic
SCREEN CONTENT

YENDA
SINCE THE 1840s

