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KENZEE PATTERSON

VAULT talks to Kenzee Patterson about mindfully navigating what it means to be a settler-colonial descendant on Aboriginal lands.

FORECAST by MICHAELA BEAR



KENZEE PATTERSON
Marea, 2019
laminated Rouse-
Port Fairy bluestone,
stainless steel
35 cm x 30 cm x 183 cm
Base: irregular, max dims.
120 cm x 80 cm x 20 cm
Photo: Tobias Titz

Courtesy the artist and
Darren Knight Gallery

Opposite
KENZEE PATTERSON
Floor You It (detail), 2021
diffused ink on handmade
paper reconstituted from
scrap conservation matt
board obtained from the
Museum of Brisbane,
resting on a railway
sleeper excavated from
the STABLE driveway and
brought into the gallery
Photo courtesy STABLE

Wales. Recognising this ancestry and its privileges is one small part of a constantly evolving strategy for living well on stolen land – an idea originating in the writings of Clare Land and Rob Garbutt.

Are there other scholars who have shaped your approach to ‘unsettling’ within your practice?

The methodology I engage within my art making is definitely shaped by the provocations of First Nations and ecofeminist scholars. Goenpul author and academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson challenges me to work beyond an ‘extractive and possessive’ relationship with the planet, and eco-philosopher Val Plumwood encourages within me a ‘radical openness’ to the more-than-human world.

How do the provocations of these two writers manifest within your ongoing *Exhausted Painting* series?

I have recently been creating sculptures and works on paper united by their reworking of materials previously considered ‘spent’. The notion of physical, emotional and material exhaustion is key to these recent works. This ternary concept of depletion offers a timely reflection on the limitations of resource extraction providing the raw materials for an art practice, as well as expressing the physical and emotional drain I have experienced.

Superficially, these new works are a pairing of found objects: timber railway sleepers, salvaged steel car exhaust pipes, sleeper earrings and paper. The formal simplicity of these works is made

Kenzee Patterson’s installations, sculptures and collaborative projects are underpinned by an awareness of the impacts extractive practices have on the environment and on First Nations and non-Indigenous communities. Found materials imbued with prior histories and textual references often feature in the artist’s potent creations.

You readily describe yourself as a ‘settler-colonial descendent’. How does this status shape your approach to art making and how you move within this world?

Defining a sense of identity and belonging as a non-Indigenous person in this country is a difficult proposition

that requires constant negotiation and revision, played out over an undetermined period of ‘unsettling’. At the same time, I understand identity to be a complex and sometimes unfixed thing – I am wary of essentialising, or too narrowly defining, subjectivity.

It is a reality though, that, through my settler-colonial heritage, I am the beneficiary of an ongoing process of displacement and dispossession experienced by Australia’s First Nations people. This was precipitated in no small way by the actions of my timber-getter ancestors, who were among the first non-Indigenous people to invade sovereign Bundjalung Country in northern New South

“I have recently been creating sculptures and works on paper united by their reworking of materials previously considered ‘spent’. The notion of physical, emotional and material exhaustion is key to these recent works.”



conceptually complex by the rigorous sourcing of materials and the narrative potential generated through language. The combination of these objects and their referents – ‘sleeper’ and ‘exhaust’ – alludes to a narrative of tiredness, while the Latin root of the word exhaustion, which means ‘to draw up’, contributes to the conceptual and physical framework of the artworks.

The idea of ‘drawing up’ is further pursued in a series of paintings created using ultrasonic diffuser units I have built. In an elaborate and generative mark-making process, it involves the transferral of ink suspended in water onto the surface of paper. Continuing my use of surplus materials, I hand-made the paper with pulped offcuts of conservation matt board reclaimed from the State Library of Queensland, the Museum of Brisbane and other Queensland collecting institutions.

My choice of these materials, supposedly neutral and archivally safe, contributes to a dialogue surrounding the role of institutions in upholding dominant histories. Currently, I am experimenting with modes of display for these works on paper, including using reclaimed railway sleepers as bearers for the paintings, contrasting the lightness of their load with the heaviness of their historical origin and purpose.

What was the premise behind the project space *Cosmopolitan Decline* that you established in 2018 while based in Broken Hill on Barkandji (Paakantji) land?

I firmly believe in the importance of artist-led activities that provide support

to other artists. It was this ethos that led me to establish the influential Sydney artist-run initiative Locksmith Project Space together with Samuel Villalobos in 2007. When I moved to Broken Hill, in 2018, I was fortunate to gain access to a studio space that was once a supermarket through a program called Renew the Far West NSW. It was a cavernous space absent of shelves and checkouts, providing the perfect opportunity to once again host other people – artists and non-artists, local people and visitors.

Broken Hill is popularly known as the ‘Silver City’ due to its ongoing significance as a source of silver, lead and zinc, which have been mined there since the early 1880s. The city still rests heavily upon the fluctuating successes of mining operations and global commodity prices. While living there I was drawn to the interconnectedness of resource extraction and the community.

In creating a space for people to gather, I was hoping to bring to the surface histories and activities that continue to shape the city, yet which occur beneath it and out of view. To do this I developed a program of readings, talks, screenings, performances and showings. I also made available a reference library containing books related to extractive processes and contested histories.

The name of the space was derived from a steep underground road, the *Cosmopolitan Decline*, which provides human bodies an access point to a subterranean orebody in Broken Hill’s North Mine. For me, this was an ideal image through which to frame

a discussion about the entanglement of human and non-human bodies, above ground and below. Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery has approached me to reimagine *Cosmopolitan Decline* for their future exhibition programming, which is exciting.

Recently you invited six other artists (Tarik Ahlip, Julia McInerney, Robert Pulie, Luke Parker, Therese Keogh and Mitchel Cumming) to participate in your solo exhibition at Darren Knight Gallery. Can you talk more about this decision and the importance of working with others?

Making art can be an isolating process, with a lot of time spent in one’s own head. While I was living in Broken Hill I embarked on a commission for the Lyon Housemuseum and Galleries in Naarm/Melbourne. I spent several months working in southwestern Victoria at a bluestone processing plant in Port Fairy. The experience was a privilege and somewhat of an adventure, but it was also a curious, lonesome trial of my own instigating. It was financially and emotionally unsustainable for me. The distance from relationships and friendships that ordinarily provide support and encouragement left me feeling utterly depleted by the end.

As a counter to the solitary nature of this commission, and to regather a community around my practice and myself, I began approaching other artists to participate in my exhibition at Darren Knight Gallery in Sydney. The development of *½ to dust* (2021) was incredibly energising. I was immensely heartened by the deep and sustained conversations I had with the artists involved.

Are you working on other collaborative projects now?

I recently produced a blind debossed print edition with Mitchel Cumming for *½ to dust*. The mutual respect and open exchange within our collaboration produced enriching outcomes that were exciting and unexpected for me. The edition will have a public outcome as part of a larger collaborative exhibition titled *A redistribution* that will be held in Meanjin/Brisbane in 2022.

I am also currently working with the artists Clare Britton and Therese Keogh on a 12-month long collaborative reading and field trip working group named *Magnetic Topographies*, which we are hoping will provide further nourishing opportunities for sharing ideas and practices. **V**

Kenzee Patterson is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.
darrenknightgallery.com
kenzeepatterson.com
magnetictopographies.cargo.site