

List of works



Vulnerable Tasmanian Plant
Goodenia amplexans

Digital image, 2003
50cm x 60cm



Wreath for Extinct
Tasmanian plant
Deyeuxia lawrencei

Digital image, 2005
50cm x 50cm



Extinct Tasmanian Plant
Botrychium australe

Digital image, 2003
50cm x 70cm



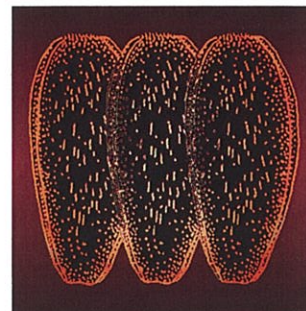
Wreath for Extinct
Tasmanian plant
Veronica notabilis

Digital image, 2004
50cm x 50cm



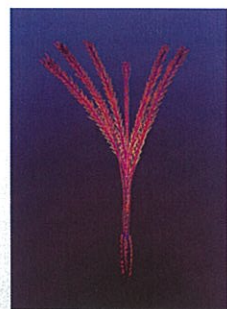
Extinct Tasmanian Plant
Vittadinia megacephala

Digital image, 2003
50cm x 60cm



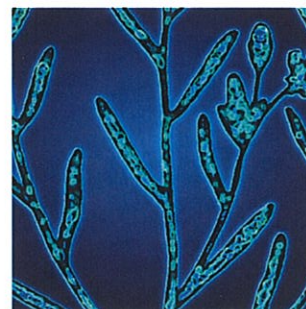
Vulnerable Tasmanian plant
Brachycome tenuiscopa var.
pubescens

Digital image, 2003
50cm x 50cm



Extinct Tasmanian plant
Podotheca angustifolia

Digital image, 2003
50cm x 70cm



Extinct Tasmanian plant
Cooperhooikia barbata

Digital image, 2003
50cm x 50cm



Tribute

Robyn Glade-Wright

8th March – 29th March 2007

Foyer Gallery
Cradle Coast Campus Burnie
University of Tasmania



No Earthly Paradise: Robyn Glade–Wright’s Tribute

*I want to tell what the forests
were like
I will have to speak
in foreign language*

W.S. Merwin, *Witness*

Central to Robyn Glade–Wright’s exhibition *Tribute* is a depiction of grief and loss as a result of botanical extinction caused by human intervention in the natural environment. Generated from companion work to her doctoral exegesis, *Making Nature: Extinct Tasmanian Plants*, these eight digital prints commemorate disappearing Tasmanian plants.

Glade–Wright’s work is an exquisite engagement with cultural and historical representations of beauty, nature, art, subjectivity, the past, environmental degeneration and death. *Tribute* refers to an immediate problem: the rapid decline in bio–diversity due to deforestation and climate change. The exhibition contests conceptions of the natural world as timeless, endlessly regenerative and available for human enjoyment. The theme of extinction lends the work an urgency and provides Glade–Wright with a frame to explore connections and ruptures in the ways that humans have made use and meaning out of nature and art.

Grief is a strong presence in this exhibition. Memorial images of six botanical species are accompanied by two digital prints of wreaths, alluding to ritual practices associated with mourning. Here Glade–Wright strives to give form to the sadness she feels in the face of the encroaching loss of life posed by extinction. The works are exquisite and delicate; they are intended to convey the fragility of the dying plants themselves. Originally produced in the form of a group of funerary objects – embroidered wreaths, funeral urns and a memory board – the images in *Tribute* are themselves a kind of metonymic echo, invoking a stark, imperative of digital preservation for a degraded material world.

Glade–Wright grounds her work in a strong sense of personal connection with the land. She writes of her attachment to Tasmania’s ethereal beauty and feelings of sadness at the evidence of plant fragility and population decline. In the ‘Prologue’ to her doctoral thesis she describes walking through the bush landscape of Tasmania and becoming aware of the contrast between wilderness and cultivation after receiving a ‘visual shock’ in the form of a neatly clipped hedge. These experiences change how she sees the landscape, foregrounding the remaining traces of wilderness and her own previous disregard. Through this project, her art practice becomes a commitment to discover whether visual art can raise social awareness of extinction through beauty.

The precise beauty of the images in *Tribute* is therefore part of a deliberate effort to ‘generate a sense of anguish’ in the viewer (Glade–Wright, 2006). The artist’s desire to break through the veil of subjectivity by means of aesthetic pleasure is a keen element in her work. If beauty is her method of hooking the viewer’s eye, it is also her self–avowed Trojan horse for recruiting horror and pity, a ‘visual and symbolic means to motivate people to consider an issue, to induce reflection’ (Glade–Wright, 2006).

Glade–Wright thus claims a powerful emotional response – through the realisation of rapidly encroaching mass extinction – as direct motivation for her work. Through her art, she invites her viewers to enter this realisation for themselves: ‘the challenge for me in my art work was to find a means that would generate reflection without attempting to describe or present a position’ (Glade–Wright, 2006).

Yet Glade–Wright does seek to remind us of the reality of our present fatal course. She invokes familiar metaphors of suffering and death. Her funerary wreaths allude to the autumnal fall of once–verdant leaves and to the thorny crown of martyrdom. Her use of colour is another key element here, as the memorial representations of the botanical specimens themselves fade from vital brilliance to ghostly phosphorescence.

Glade–Wright’s engagement with beauty and death is informed by study and reflection on a related theme that has long preoccupied human encounters with nature: the dialectic between aesthetic discourses of wilderness and civilization. For

thousands of years humans have seen ‘nature’ as a force to be conquered. We have striven to reshape the land and its progeny to suit our own economic and aesthetic purposes – from the monuments of the ancient world and the cultivated gardens of Europe to our own present global interventions. After beginning his twenty–six year reign of Commagene, as long ago as 64BC, Antiochus the 1st took this human ambition to exaggerated heights when he caused the soaring mountain of Nemrut Dagi to be extensively recontoured and capped with a perfect conical peak. Modern engineers have been equally driven by the desire to rebuild nature for human use, surpassing the feats of the ancients with towering cities, gigantic bridges, vast water catchments, mining and industrial machines of once–unimaginable productivity.

Meanwhile, we have maintained within our culture two fundamental and contradictory views. Firstly, that nature and civilisation are opposed and that the outlands of wilderness must be tamed and domesticated so as to nurture, above all, human life. Secondly, that nature must be cherished as a source of special nurturance and value, divinely impervious to the minutiae of human enterprise, an eternal pastoral, a sacred balm to which we can always turn for inspiration or to soothe our souls. For centuries, writers and artists have wrestled with this tension. The seventeenth–century poet Andrew Marvell wrote against the English gardener’s art of cultivation. In painting the measured proportions of neo–classicism, as exercised by Nicholas Poussin or Raphael, were later answered by the rugged scenes of wild seas and dramatic mountain landscapes by romanticist painters such as Caspar David Friedrich and Eugene Von Guerard.

It might be argued that *Tribute* enters into a romantic reification of nature, that Glade–Wright projects her own desire for aesthetic beauty and pleasure, expressing sentiment for the imaginary landscape of her reflexive inner eye. Or, that the heightened sense of beauty and horror in these images of mourning offers a supplicant gesture of farewell – a letting go of the possibility of reclamation. But this would be to ignore the reality of lost species and the pressing context of Tasmanian extinction: immediate international concerns about the impact of global warming and the dark implications of rapidly declining bio–diversity for long term biological survival, including human life. Information available on the Australian Government Department of Environment and Water Resources website states that over sixty Australian plants are already extinct and over five hundred are now endangered. Some scientists argue that the earth is facing the sixth mass extinction in the planet’s history, the only event of its kind with a single cause – human intervention.

The biologist Penny Olsen has referred to the way that extinction conveys a special kind of allure. Her study of the Paradise Parrot, its elusive habits, controversial sightings, media hoaxes and the longevity of public denial about its loss as a unique Australian species, shows how the mystique of extinction can lend a patina of glamour to a brutal reality (Olsen, 2005). This glamour cushions the recognition that extinction is a real problem, not just for the individual species that are lost, or the disruption this may cause to the eco–systems that they inhabit, but potentially to planetary conditions for all forms of life.

The plants, birds and animals of Australia’s past are little known and rarely missed in our daily lives. We no longer know their names. Even if we are weekend seekers of wilderness, few of us could identify what is lost or what remains. As W.S. Merwin writes in his poem *Witness*, the disappearing forests and their creatures are already almost forgotten.

Beautiful and mournful, Robyn Glade–Wright, too, reminds us that extinction is final. Rarely can a vulnerable species be brought back from the brink. Forest replanting, while beneficial to earth’s atmospheric conditions, can never bring back the rich habitats, formed over millennia, that can sustain a diverse plenitude of life forms. There is no Noah’s Ark that can save us, no earthly paradise to which we can be restored.

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March 2007

References

Glade–Wright, Robyn, ‘Prologue’. *Making Nature: Extinct Tasmanian Plants*. Unpublished doctoral thesis: 2006.

Glade–Wright, Robyn. *Making Nature: Extinct Tasmanian Plants*. Exhibition shown at The Academy art gallery, Launceston: January 2007.

Merwin, W.S. ‘Witness’. *Migration: New and Selected Poems*. Copper Canyon Press: 2005

Olsen, Penny. *NLA News* (15.6): March 2005.