



EXODUS

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Exodus: A Fragile Beauty, Coral Bleaching and Heat Stress

The Great Barrier Reef is imagined by many people to be an icon of natural beauty, rich in marine life and vibrant in colour. The immense size of the reef creates an impression of permanence and stability suggesting that the reef will live forever. However, recent surveys indicate that around half the coral in the Great Barrier Reef is bleached and silently dissolving. The loss of life in the reef occurs largely under water, out at sea and out of sight. *Exodus* is an artwork produced in response to the silent and largely unseen loss of life of a significant part of the once majestic reef.

The title *Exodus* refers to the loss of millions of tiny algae that once lived in a symbiotic relationship with the coral. The algae, called zooxanthellae supply the coral with nutrients so it will grow and reproduce. Much of the vivid colour of the coral reef is provided by the living algae. These microscopic algae are sensitive to increased sea temperatures (Douglas 2003). Rises in sea temperature of just one degree can cause heat stress and prolonged exposure over several weeks can kill the algae (Douglas 2003). With the death and *Exodus* of millions of live algae, the coral is starved and the reef, devoid of life, bleaches: there is a loss of life and a demise of natural beauty.

People value beauty and tend to be beauty seeking. This is why people want to live in beautiful places, find beautiful partners and visit beautiful sights (Armstrong 2004). The American philosopher Elaine Scarry writes that people recognise that other people's lives are enhanced if they have access to beauty (1991). Furthermore,

people are upset when they hear of the loss of beauty, even when their own purposes are not being served by others having beauty (Scarry 1991). For example, people can be upset to hear about the loss of a giant kelp forest when, in all likelihood, they would never have experienced the natural beauty of a kelp forest or even known of its beauty until the moment they heard about its loss. Similarly, the loss of the beauty of the coral reef reduces the opportunity for people to experience and value instances of beauty.

Scarry argues that beautiful objects elicit a form of stewardship (1991). This stewardship is a reciprocal welcoming or salute to the dignity of the other. Moreover, Scarry writes that the stewardship elicits a desire to protect and nurture existing beauty and also to bring new beauty into the world (1991). The desire to nurture and to replicate beauty is evident when, for example, people see a beautiful ceramic vessel or a painting in a gallery and feel moved to create an item to replicate the beauty of the original. The desire for stewardship and for the protection of the beauty of the world is a part of the motivation for the artwork *Exodus*.

Exodus is a symbolic representation of bleached coral. The piece takes the form of a long boat or canoe, spanning eight and a half metres from bow to stern. The boat form floats quietly in the gallery, carrying its cargo to an unmarked grave. The white-washed forms in *Exodus* recall Arnold Böcklin's painting *Isle of the Dead*, 1880, in which a shrouded white form ferries a recently deceased soul, a human cargo, to its resting place. The boat form is used in *Exodus*

to suggest the passage of coral to an imagined watery ossuary. The scale implies both the magnitude of the problem of coral bleaching and the need to live in a sustainable manner that will nurture people and the environment.

The materials in *Exodus* were collected from the seashore and the garden. Round seedpods, from a tree growing along the sea edge and stripped of their outer layer by the waves, were collected and hung on nylon line to create coral-looking forms. Plant materials from palms which once supported seeds, were trimmed and twisted onto circular forms to emulate the appearance of coral. Beads of several sizes were glued to trimmed stems of palms. The beads suggested the rippled surface of some corals in a fairly overt manner to provide the visual clue that the piece was coral and these beaded forms were used to imply that the whole piece was a representation of a reef. The materials in *Exodus* were all white-washed with several coats of white paint to suggest the bleaching of the reef.

The elements in *Exodus* are hung with nylon line from the ceiling. The work sways gently as if the ocean current is washing it away. *Exodus* was hung ten centimetres from the gallery wall enabling the white components to cast a swath of blue-gray shadows. The shadows are devoid of life, emulating the lifeless bleached coral. Shadows can carry associations of gloom and treachery and these suggestions resonate with the drama of the reef and concerns regarding the prioritising of profit over regard for the environment.

Exodus raises the subject of the loss of beauty and yet it takes a beautiful form. The beautiful form of *Exodus* attempts to elicit the welcoming admiration described by Scarry. And yet, there is an awareness that this fragile beauty, suffering from heat stress in a

warming global climate, will soon dissolve and be lost forever. Armstrong writes that "Awareness of beauty makes the ugliness of existence all the harder to bear" (2004, p. 84). It is hard to fathom how the beauty of the reef might be replaced by an unbearable ugliness. *Exodus* engages with beauty in a subversive manner. The beauty of the piece suggests the beauty of a reef but one soon realises that bleached reefs are collapsing in an underwater wasteland. The application of beauty in *Exodus* aims to remind us of the transient, fleeting and vulnerable beauty of the coral reef.

In physically beautiful objects we find purity, perfection, harmony and order (Armstrong 2004, p. 72). Furthermore, an experience of beauty involves a sense of kinship between an object and one's soul (Armstrong 2004, p. 72). The loss of perfection, harmony and order apparent in a bleached coral reef can sever the kinship we share with other sentient beings. This disruption of perfection, harmony and order can upset one's soul. Sadly, *Exodus* aims to induce this conative journey. In this way, its beauty is subversive.

Coral bleaching occurs in silence and mainly out of sight. *Exodus* aims to make the unseen visible and to bring to the surface the dramatic loss of life. When beauty of the world is lost, in this case, due to bleaching, the opportunity for meaningful relationships with other living entities is diminished. If half the coral in the Great Barrier Reef has been bleached, then it follows, that half remains. Is there hope that we can prevent any further losses from occurring on our watch?

– Robyn Glade-Wright

References

Armstrong, J 2004, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, Allen Lane, London.

Scarry, E 1991, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Douglas, A 2003, 'Coral bleaching - how and why?' *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, vol 46, no. 4, April, pp. 385-392.

List of works

Exodus: coral bleaching 2014, vegetation, beads and paint 90 x 880 x 20cm

Cook's gaze 2014, digital image, 20 x 25cm

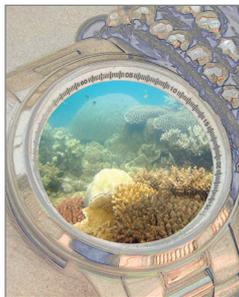
Watch out 2014, digital image, 20 x 25cm

Bleached coral in plane sight 2014, digital image, 20 x 25cm

Coral coloured glasses 2014, digital image, 20 x 25cm

Body coral 2014, digital image, 20 x 25cm

A hand in coral bleaching 2014, digital image, 20 x 25cm



Clockwise from top: *Exodus: coral bleaching* 2014 (installation view)
A hand in coral bleaching 2014
Body coral 2014
Coral coloured glasses 2014
Bleached coral in plane sight 2014
Watch out 2014
Cook's gaze 2014

Cover and inside image: *Exodus: coral bleaching* (detail) 2014
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