

DEVONPORT REGIONAL GALLERY Between Fire and Flood

Troy Ruffels 2017 Solo Commission

Foreword

Ellie Ray

Director, Devonport Regional Gallery

The Devonport Regional Gallery Solo Commission program has been running since 2005. In its first year Jane Stewart, then Gallery Director, commissioned Richard Wastell to produce a series of new paintings. In the foreword to Wastell's catalogue, Stewart notes that Wastell's paintings 'evoke a myriad of reactions in the viewer and offer an emotive and deeply considered response to the Tasmanian environment'.

At the heart of Troy Ruffels' photographic work there also resides a response to the Tasmanian environment – specifically the climate of the North West landscape. Ruffels observes: 'In the studio, and in the 12-month development of the exhibition, my focus often shifted to the use, qualities and attributes of light and emotive tone, and how, through finding visual equivalents for often elusive states, I could translate the qualities of harmony and discord, weight and gravity, solace and conflict, and the poetics of human endeavour into visual form.'

The emotive power Ruffels' work communicates can be likened to seasonal changes where physical shifts in nature can trigger moods as far ranging as joy to melancholy. In a series of photographic works that appear as multiple reflections shimmering on aluminum supports, *Between Fire and Flood* balances counter-emotive states with those of nature – loss, growth and change. I congratulate Troy on presenting an exhibition that poetically represents the complexities of internal and external states of being where mind and nature coalesce.

Biography

www.troyruffels.com/biography

Troy Ruffels was born in Devonport, Tasmania in 1972. His practice crosses boundaries of painting, new media and photography. Graduating from the Tasmanian School of Art, where he was awarded a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honours in 1996, Ruffels was directly curated into *Primavera 1997*, the Museum of Contemporary Art's cutting-edge annual exhibition of exceptional, emerging Australian artists.

In 1998 Ruffels was named Young Tasmanian Achiever of the Year (Visual and Performing Arts Category). In the year 2000, after being awarded an Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship, Ruffels studied at the Glasgow School of Art, to then return to Tasmania where he completed his PhD at the University of Tasmania.

Ruffels has exhibited widely, holding solo exhibitions both within Australia and internationally, including Spain, Malaysia, Singapore and the UK. His work has also been featured in numerous Australian and internationally-curated group survey exhibitions, including New York, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Germany.

Troy Ruffels' work is held in numerous public and private collections both nationally and internationally.



The intervals of distance #2, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Interval #4, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



A sky by nature skyless, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



After the flood, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



The bone gardens, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Compass, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Interval #3, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



At the edge of things, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Luminous Worlds, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Constellations, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Interval #2, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Interval #1, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017

Between Fire and Flood

Dr Karen Hall

School of Creative Arts, University of Tasmania

Troy Ruffels' work is characterised by its subtly intertwined layers, where observations of the natural landscape are overlain in a richly textured palimpsest. Marked by hand and eye, these landscapes are simultaneously interior and exterior. They emerge from a deep familiarity with place, revisited as both inhabitant and traveller, a perspective informed by Ruffels' anchoring within the North West of Tasmania and his movements around the island. Each work bears the intensity of a specific location and moment while resonating with wider connections and concerns: we glimpse a luminous world where the visible surface is invested with the halo of the unseen.

Ruffels' work usually invites contemplation, rewarding the persistent and returning gaze with a slowly unfolding intimacy. What marks the work for this exhibition, however, is the sense of intensity where reflection explodes into movement – the lines of flight, the fanning feathers beating the air, the speckled star field that is also falling ash, the force of raindrops puckering the skin of the water. Taken out of time, suspended, the smaller movements also gesture towards the passage of time. The cyclical unfurling of seasons is punctuated with the excessive temporality of disaster. The moment of crisis unfolding, inescapable, is also the constant presence of what it takes and what it leaves behind.

In the summer of 2016, fires burnt in the alpine habitat and temperate rainforest of Tasmania's World Heritage wilderness areas: bushfires out of control in environments that are not accustomed to burning. The remains will not simply regenerate; the damage cannot

be repaired. The anticipated future of climate change moves from the realm of prediction into reality. In Ruffels' work, the imagery of fire becomes tangible: the heat haze warping the air, smoke encrusting the sky, its taste in the back of your mouth. The burning pyres evoke this wider loss, while also alluding to human rituals of mourning. The flickering consumption of the remnants present us with the duality of destruction and memory.

Later that same year, the winter saw flooding across Tasmania. In the North West, rivers burst their banks and bridges were broken. The debris left behind attested to the weight of water pushing logs downstream. We can imagine a flood as a slow moving disaster, gathering the rainfall, swelling down tributaries to peaks downstream. Anticipating the water rising leads to waiting and watching, marking the changes to the landscape. But floods are not just the gift of fronts, clouds and rain – human interventions in the landscape shape the watershed. The piled debris left by the flood is the visual echo of the pile of rejected logs left behind for burning in cleared forestry coupes. They are bone gardens of bleached wood. Human actions create displacement and in Ruffels' work these moments confront the viewer with their complicity in land shaping. Emily Dickenson's seemingly impossible statement – 'you cannot fold a flood/and put it in a drawer' – suggests that what registers, initially, as an intrusion into the ordinary turns out to have been there all along. A flood need not just be an event: it stands in for a state of constant influx, the lived experience of being amid an overwhelming flow.

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that the tangled shelter of branches and brambles is another recurring image within this body of work. Silhouetted, the starkly intertwined patterns form a protective enclosure. They gather the viewer within rather than keeping them out. The bare

branches of deciduous trees mix with eucalyptus canopies, an interplay that speaks of the persistence of endemic species in the planting of introduced colonial flora. The netted arcs hold the space and frame what lies beyond. Through the line of fence or twig, we are drawn upward to the remoteness of the sky. The variability of the sky, its changing cloudscapes carrying light, are explored here through subtle interventions and an interplay of digital and analogue mark making. Unmoored by the dissolving horizon, the sky stretches out. It offers an invitation to open, to breathe. Placed in both earth and air, occupying the space in between, Ruffels places the viewer in TS Eliot's 'still point of the turning world'.

The rivers lead us out to the sea. Here, the rhythmic draw of the waves and tide form an undertow, pulling out into dark waters. The sea is another part of Ruffels' known terrain, marked by deep familiarity. The bodies of water, which range from still, reflecting mirrors to the turmoil of the storm, materialise as other selves. Poised for viewing, inherently active, they are not projections but rather co-inhabitants of the landscape.

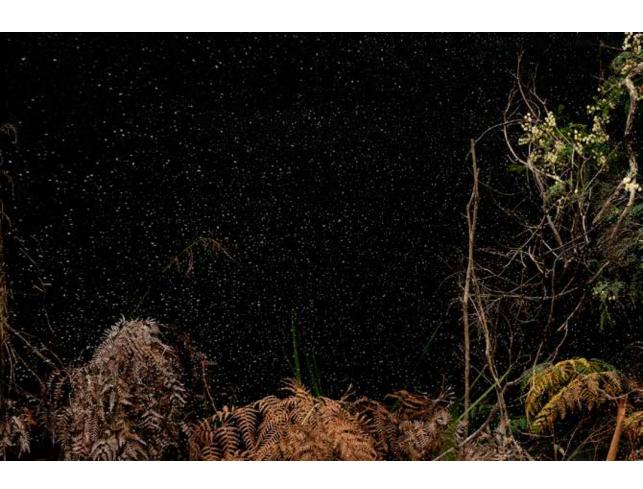
Seeing the landscape and its elements as agents with their own histories, their own acts of making, allows us to see the transformative act of layering in Ruffels' work as collaborative. He does not dictate the landscape, but instead embraces uncertainty, polarity and oscillations within a process of re-making. Navigating internal emotional landscapes through the visible world is a reckoning with what will not go away. At a time in which the virtual inundation of information, fears and competing voices clouds and threatens, these works valorise forms of knowing and being that arise from circulation and connection. The duality of flood and fire, the intensity of conflagration and inundation, gives way to the space between. In that liminal space, invested with gravity and weight, can we see and be seen.



Remains of day, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Tidal, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Understory, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Between earth and it's noun, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



A sky's archaeology, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Low Sky, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Inundation and flood, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



As night falls, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Passage, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Finches, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Eucalyptus Sky, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017



Found song, digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 2017

List of Works

All works courtesy of the artist and Bett Gallery Hobart

Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 60 x 90cm	Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 100 x 1750cm
Interval #4, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 60 x 90cm	Interval #1, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 60 x 90cm
A sky by nature skyless, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 60 x 90cm	Understory, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 100 x 1750cm
After the flood, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 60 x 90cm	The bone gardens, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 2200 x 3300cm
At the edge of things, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 2200 x 3300cm	Luminous Worlds, 2017 Digital print on composite aluminium sheet 100 x 1750cm
	100 x 1/30cm

Interval #2, 2017

Luminous worlds #3, 2017

Fire and flood, 2017	Finches, 2017
Digital print on composite aluminium sheet	Digital print on composite aluminium sheet
100 x 1750cm	60 x 90cm
Interval #5, 2017	The intervals of distance #2, 2017
Digital print on composite aluminium sheet	Digital print on composite aluminium sheet
60 x 90cm	60 x 90cm
Tidal, 2017	Between earth and it's noun, 2017
Digital print on composite aluminium sheet	Digital print on composite aluminium sheet
60 x 90cm	60 x 90cm
A sky's archaeology, 2017	Constellations, 2017
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As night falls, 2017

Digital print on composite aluminium sheet

60 x 90cm

Eucalyptus Sky, 2017

Digital print on composite aluminium sheet

60 x 90cm

Remains of day, 2017

Digital print on composite aluminium sheet

60 x 90cm

Turning world, 2017

Digital print on composite aluminium sheet

60 x 90cm

Still Point, 2017

Digital print on composite aluminium sheet

60 x 90cm

Amidst a shelter of branches, 2017

Digital print on composite aluminium sheet

60 x 90cm

Troy Ruffels would like to thank Ellie Ray for her curatorial work on this project, as well as staff at the Devonport Regional Gallery. Special thanks to Dr Karen Hall for her insightful catalogue essay and opening address. The artist is indebted to Bett Gallery Hobart, in particular Emma and Jack, for their continued support over the last two decades. Thanks also go to his partner, Anne Morrison, and daughter Clara Ruffels for their endless patience, love and support.

Troy Ruffels is represented by Bett Gallery Hobart.

All works courtesy of the artist and Bett Gallery Hobart.

www.troyruffels.com www.bettgallery.com.au

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Cover Image: Fire and flood, 2017, Digital print on composite aluminium sheet, 100 x 1750cm

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