

Understory

Understory is the first in a series of exhibitions that have been developed under the Devonport Regional Gallery's recently established 'Guest Curator Program'. The program is designed to encourage and assist curators to develop innovative and well-researched exhibitions for the benefit of the community and visitors to Devonport.

Curators at different stages in their careers are invited to participate in the program, and selected exhibitions will be developed for touring within, and outside of the state.

Dr Troy Ruffels has worked closely with the Gallery in all stages of this project. The curator's research and selection of art works combine to create an inspiring nexus of ideas and imagery from around the globe.

DR ELLIE RAY
DIRECTOR

Understory

What are we talking about when we talk about nature? As a concept, 'nature' refers to a wider sphere of reference than simply the terms 'landscape' or 'environment'. It is both a means through which humanity imagines difference and specificity, and a scientific concept that refers to the structures and processes underlying all biological and technological activity. 'Nature', as it is generally used in everyday discussion, is also the nature of immediate experience, an appreciation of landscape or wilderness. But is it a paradox to speak about nature as though it is something separate from ourselves, like a noun, extracted as something fixed and permanent.¹ In reality, all things undergo perpetual change and are in a continual process of transformation.

Perhaps our understanding and definition of nature needs to be modified as species adapt to changing environments and technologies evolve. After all, what we are talking about is an immense assemblage of complex relationships and living systems in which there is rarely a consistent and predictable pattern. Nature 'just happens', and it keeps surprising us. It lives here; it is us—our cities and urban habitats, our forests, oceans, arid expanses, sub-zero climates and refuse sites.

Tim Low, in his book *New nature*², examines some of the ironies, contradictions and paradoxes in how we view and engage with the natural world. Aside from challenging the 'wilderness myth', he cites numerous examples demonstrating the necessity for a revised approach when considering the natural world, of which, he argues, we are an integral and active part. Our actions can sometimes have unforeseen consequences if based on outdated assumptions. One of many examples Low provides is that in cleaning up Sydney's sewage pollution, the largest albatross colony in the Southern Hemisphere was unexpectedly devastated. In the flick of a switch, a food chain built over centuries was redirected, resulting in the collapse of an entire ecosystem. Low points out that many of Australia's endangered

flora and fauna exist in peripheral and cohabitated zones; on the suburban fringes, in cottage gardens, cemeteries, refuse sites, kempt reserves and grazed paddocks. This is in stark contrast to commonly accepted principles relating to the preservation and conservation of wilderness and native habitats.

Jaun Ford's recent paintings, in which he combines native flora with 'stuff' from the hardware store, depict strange entangled unions of unlikely forms that through their assemblage and subsequent rendering just happen to work.

Forging new connections with nature is explored in the work of Cary Peppermint and Leila Christine Nadir who founded the *ecoarttech*³ collaborative in 2005. *Wilderness Trouble* is their response to an article by William Cronon titled 'The trouble with wilderness; or, getting back to the wrong nature'⁴. Cronon argues for the need to reconsider our approach to preservation and conservation in creating a sustainable model of cohabitation based on ethical and moral principles. It is generally accepted that, as a term, 'nature' is a cultural and historical construct, and that we are all entangled in the implications of its definition. In *Wilderness Trouble* the 'technological' is retained as a dynamic element as Peppermint and Nadir navigate the contemporary and political mire of eco relationships.

Parallel to Low and Cronon who challenge prevailing cultural attitudes, scientific studies in multiple fields around the world are uncovering surprising paradoxes that usurp many of the assumptions made with regard to living systems. One example is the current debate on whether some migratory fish species rely on an encoded genetic memory or a cultural memory. The implications of the latter being proven are significant. Aside from the dire impact of overfishing with relation to current catch size limits (catching the bigger fish) reducing the genetic makeup of the population, a shared cultural memory is also at risk. Not only are the overall populations being reduced, but the fish are not finding their way back to the most suitable breeding grounds, and thus, a second feedback loop begins to occur diminishing the population on multiple fronts⁵. Issues such as these, and those illustrated in Low's *New nature*, raise pertinent questions, inciting us to address moral and ethical dilemmas in relation to a shared environmental coexistence.

Stephanie Valentin's work draws upon the scientific model to explore the dynamic interplay between nature and culture. In her series of photographs titled *Pollinate*, Valentin worked with a group of scientists who devised a technique enabling her to engrave words, numerals and marks into the microscopic surfaces of individual pollen grains. An intertextual narrative emerges as we construct relationships through navigating words like: captivate, enchant, touch and subdue, in the poetic world of sub-visible space.

The natural world has long been a source of inspiration for artists. Some respond to the environment through the contested 'landscape' genre while others interact, engage, perform, install or exhibit their work in the environment itself. Regardless of what form it takes, this type of active engagement—where the result is a genuine emotional affinity or empathy for nature—can play a major role in influencing pro-environmental attitudes.

Beverley Veasey's *Natural History 2* is a series of images representing animals in the cold mute sterility of artificial habitats. The images raise the question of humility—or lack thereof—in our treatment of other living beings. Veasey's works amplify the often-silent way in which we exploit nature to serve our own ends. We cannot escape the fact, however, that our actions have moral and ethical implications.

New media technologies both limit and expand our conceptions of nature and the environment. There is much to be gleaned from the interaction of natural and cultural relationships within art and science, and the translation of this through new media art. Stephen Hurrel's installation *Beneath and Beyond* is a sound-based artwork that broadcasts the noises of the earth's seismic forces, in real-time, into the gallery space via the internet. The viewer experiences a codified landscape, generated through an interpretation of live data streaming from seismic monitoring stations around the globe. Slowed down by software to make the sounds audible to the human ear, the viewer is immersed in an acoustic hemisphere of seismic vibrations. Data and sound wave graphs are visualised on large projection screens and major events are highlighted in red—drawing attention to an event occurring in present tense either close by or in some far distant place.

'Understorey' typically refers to the area of a forest that grows at the lowest level below the forest canopy. It consists of a mixture of young emergent plants and ground vegetation. Available light is harnessed for its energy as the understorey slowly emerges and consolidates. The upper storey will eventually exhaust itself, give way, collapse, and create a feedback loop. It is a useful metaphor for transformation and renewal of cultural ideas. It is not long ago that it was too overwhelming for an artist to paint a landscape directly from nature. In the context of this exhibition, I intend the term 'understorey' to imply a level of personal narrative—a story if you like, which is created from a stream of thought that exists outside the limits of mainstream consciousness. It infers that the shift in thought necessary to establish equilibrium represents a paradigm shift that would have us relate to the natural world in currently unimaginable ways.

With climate change now an accepted and established science, diminishing biodiversity around the globe, and new scientific frontiers emerging, the need for such a shift is clearly evident. It requires, however, a fundamental change in our values, attitudes, patterns of consumption and economic structures. The question is: What steps need to be taken to achieve such a dramatic and philosophical change?

Michael Light's image of the full moon from lunar geological survey imagery made by the *Apollo* astronauts presents one of the most alluring images to humankind. It symbolises our successes and failures, our hopes and dreams, our technical achievements and off-world aspirations. It is a significant part of this understorey—from looking to the stars, and then taking those first steps on the moon, to thinking about mining asteroids as they hurtle through space. But I have an image in my mind—of *Voyager 2*, outbound, on a one-way trajectory, looking back at the earth for the last time—and I wonder, if I were *Voyager 2*, how I would have rated our chances?

Joyce Campbell works across a range of disciplines in examining the collision of natural and cultural systems. Her recent work revisits a range of older photographic processes for creating images. Campbell's Antarctic *Last Light* daguerreotypes present immense icescapes that appear to be completely devoid of human presence, representing vast expanses of untouchable sublime space—but of course there is the hidden presence of the photographer.

Visible within the fragile mirrored surface of the photographic plates are haunting images that evoke a landscape on the brink, showing signs of decay, stress and fracture.

The abstract notion of utopia, however unattainable a perfect existence may be, requires that we step away from our current situation and ponder ways of 'doing things better'. Hayden Fowler's video work *Second Nature* explores the fine line separating utopia from dystopia. The work depicts a futuristic human space colony, somewhere beyond earth and nature, whose occupants hold on to the scarce remainders of life within the confines of the spacecraft that supports them. The work evokes an uneasy sense of interdependence between man, nature and machine, while establishing a useful metaphor for which to consider the current environmental dilemma. Utopian thought can make a valuable contribution to social criticism. In fact, imagining new horizons, positing new paradigms, and embracing the aspirations of an age, is necessary—so long as we heed the cautions of the past that ideals should never be overtaken by hubris.

Juxtaposed against the plausible reality that nature 'just happens', many artists share a fascination with the systems of classification we impose upon the world in order to make sense of it. There is often, however, a disparity between the modes of classifying and codifying things, and the sensorial and poetic evocations of nature as we experience it.

Richard Louv, in his book *Last child in the woods*⁶, considers the growing body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for the healthy physical and emotional development of children and adults. Louv argues that in the lives of today's cyber kids there is a lack of meaningful engagement with nature, and that this is having disastrous consequences. Louv calls it 'nature deficit disorder' and links the lack of contact with nature to disturbing rises in childhood obesity, attention disorders and depression—leaving one to speculate as to the long-term implications of our patterns of behaviour.

Art and cultural works are an essential means through which to increase awareness, challenge assumptions and shift perceptions. Although cultural creation may result in a change of attitudes, they can sometimes have the opposite effect, rendering us removed from the very

difficulty it confronts. This is an irreconcilable problem: reality is mediated by culture, yet art retains the capacity to draw attention to the gravity of the conditions we confront, and to the implicit contradictions they contain.

While *Understory* draws together multiple personal narratives within individual artist's work, it is in the intermingling of these narratives that other stories emerge—asking that we question rather than blindly accept the prevailing assumptions of our time. In the intonations, in the gaps and spaces, there is a need, if ever there was one, to be 'in our time'. To refresh, empty the cache and get up to speed with where we are at, so that we can determine where we want to be in the future.

Today, and every today, I will spend time with my daughter in the garden. We will dig and feel the heft and weight of the earth as it sifts through our fingers. We will discover worms and insect larvae, perhaps bury a dead bird. Maybe we'll even document our progress and email to friends. We'll plant something and over the course of time watch it grow.

DR TROY RUFFELS, MAY 2010

Dr Troy Ruffels is an artist based on the North West Coast of Tasmania.

He is Head of Photomedia at the School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania.

1. David Bohm, in writing about fragmentation and wholeness, examines our conception of the environment as one viewed as 'an aggregate of separately existent parts, to be exploited by different groups of people.' He goes on to propose that such 'fragmentation' is the consequence of the subject-verb-object structure of most modern languages, and considers alternative structures and their implications.
Bohm, David, *Wholeness and the implicate order*, Ark Paperbacks, 1980.
2. Low, Tim, *New nature: winners and losers in wild Australia*, Penguin Books, 2002.
3. www.ecoarttech.net
4. Cronon, William, 'The trouble with wilderness, or, getting back to the wrong nature', *Environmental History*, vol. 1, no.1, January 1996, pp. 7-55
5. ABC, Radio National, 'Throw the big fish back', *The Science Show*, 16 April 2005.
6. Louv, Richard, *Last child in the woods: saving our children from nature deficit disorder*, Algonquin Books, 2005.



BEVERLEY VEASEY

Study of a White Handed Gibbon: Hylobates lar, 2006

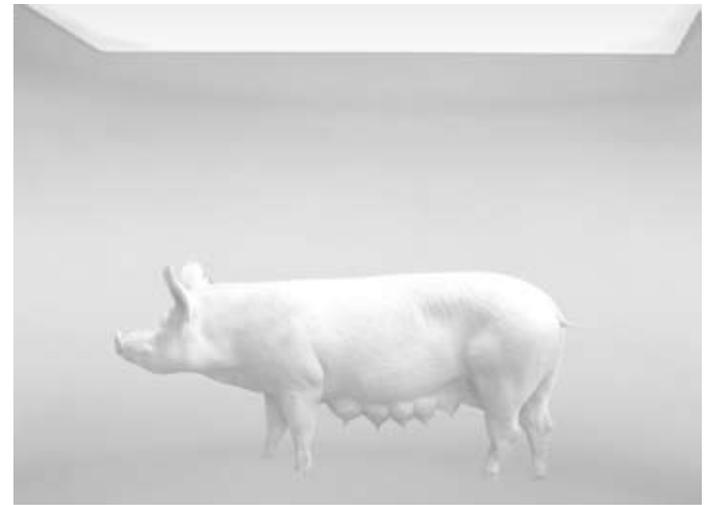
Study of a Goat: Capra hircus, 2006

Study of a Sow: Sus scrofa domesticus, 2006

Series: Natural History

Lightjet print, 64 x 88 cm, edition of 10

Copyright: Beverley Veasey. Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney





HAYDEN FOWLER

Second Nature
Digital Video Installation 2008

Second Nature i
Second Nature iii
Second Nature v
Mounted chromogenic photographs, 105 x 130 cm, 2008
Photo credit: Joy Lai



JUAN FORD

Busted Bouquet, 2009
Oil on linen, 51 x 36 cm

The Other Hidden Hand, 2009
Oil on linen, 122 x 107 cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Diane Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne





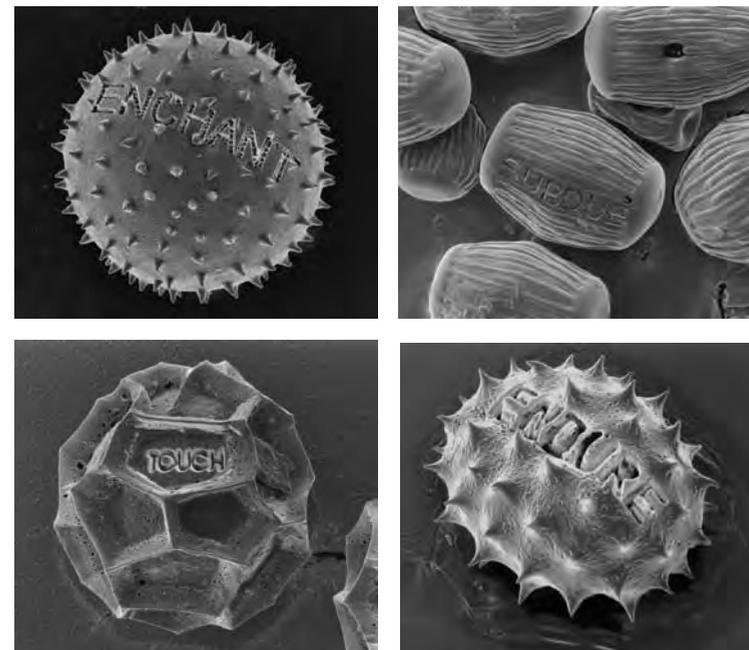
STEPHANIE VALENTIN

Terraïum, 2009

Series: *Earthbound*

Pigment print, 70 x 86 cm, edition of 6

Copyright: Stephanie Valentin. Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney



Globba winni (etched pollen grain - magnification 6,000X)

Polygala (etched pollen grain - magnification 4000X)

Zinnia 2 (etched pollen grain - magnification 5000X)

Arctotis 1 (etched pollen grain - magnification 6500X)

series: *Pollinate, 2002*

Gelatin silver print, 18 x 21cm, edition of 7

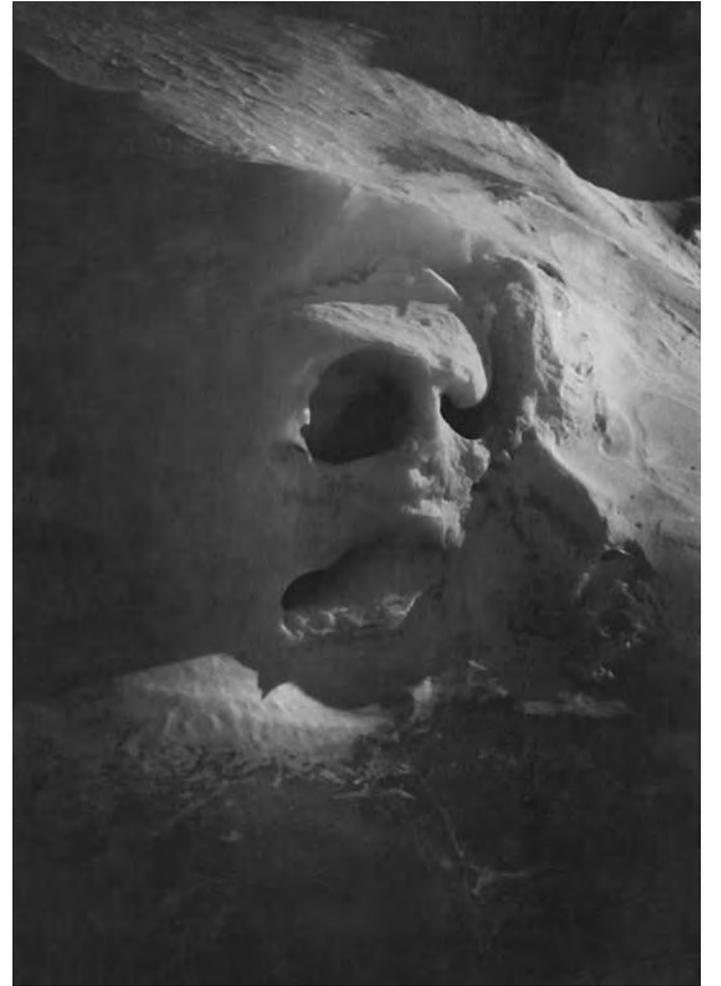
Copyright: Stephanie Valentin. Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney

JOYCE CAMPBELL

Ice Ghoul, Antarctica, 2006

Daguerreotypes, 127 x 180 mm

Copyright: Joyce Campbell. Courtesy of the Artist and McNamara Photography



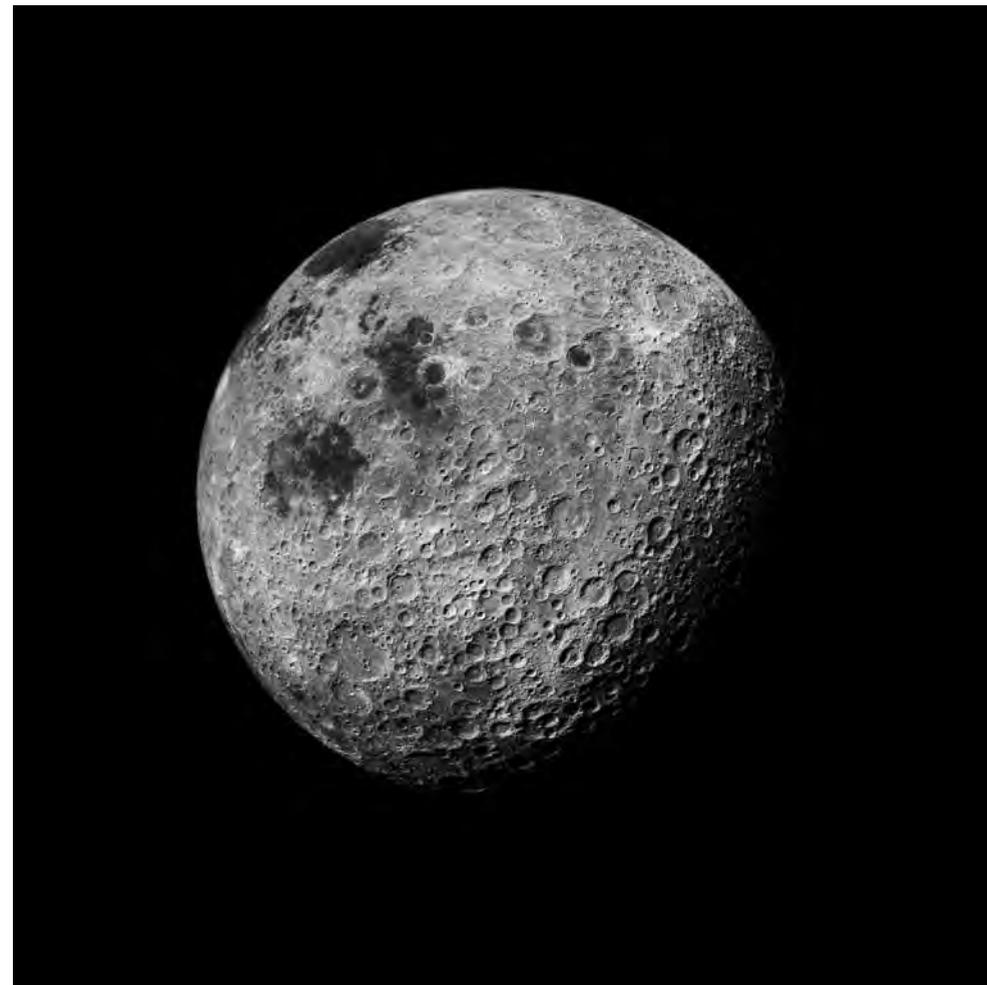
MICHAEL LIGHT

A view of the moon captured at about 1000 miles as the astronauts head back to earth, 1999

Series: Full Moon Project

Fuji Crystal Archive print, 100 x 100 cm, edition of 50

Copyright: Michael Light. Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney





CARY PEPPERMINT AND LEILA CHRISTINE NADIR

Wilderness Trouble, 2006

Digital video, podcast & DVD, video stills
Courtesy of the Artists



STEPHANIE VALENTIN
Australia

<http://www.stillsgallery.com.au>

Represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney

Polygala (subdue)

Zinnia 2

Globba winni

Arctotis 1

2002

Silver gelatin (fb) prints

Dimensions unframed: 18 x 21 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery

Rainbook

Terrarium

Gathering Field #3 (Lake Mungo Foreshore)

2009

Pigment prints

Dimensions unframed: 70 x 86 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery

BEVERLEY VEASEY
Australia

<http://www.stillsgallery.com.au>

Represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney

Study of a White Handed Gibbon: Hylobates lar

Study of a Goat: Capra Hircus

Study of a Sow: Sus Scrofa Domesticus

2006

Lightjet prints

Dimensions unframed: 64 x 88 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery

JOYCE CAMPBELL
New Zealand

www.joycecampbell.com

Represented by McNamara Gallery in
Wanganui (NZ), & Two Rooms in Auckland (NZ)

Snow cave #2, Antarctica

Pressure ridge, Antarctica

Snow cave #1, Antarctica

Crevasse #2, Antarctica

Ice Ghoul #2, Antarctica

Crevasse #1, Antarctica

2006

Daguerreotypes

Dimensions framed: 127 x 180 mm each

Courtesy of the Artist and McNamara Photography

Erebus triptych, Antarctica

2006

Daguerreotype

Dimensions: 127 x 180mm each

Courtesy of the Artist and Two Rooms, Auckland

ecoarttech
(LEILA CHRISTINE NADIR & CARY PEPPERMINT)
USA

Wilderness Trouble

2006

Digital Video

Courtesy of the Artists

JUAN FORD
Australia

elbrusho@optusnet.com.au

<http://www.juanford.com>

Represented by Diane Tanzer Gallery,
Melbourne

Jan Manton Art, Brisbane

Sullivan and Strumpf Gallery, Sydney

Stardust

2009

Oil on linen

Dimensions unframed: 51 x 41 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Jan Manton Art

The Other Hidden Hand

2009

Oil on linen

Dimensions unframed: 122 x 107 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Dianne Tanzer
Gallery and Projects

Busted Bouquet

2009

Oil on linen

Dimensions unframed: 51 x 36 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Dianne Tanzer
Gallery

HAYDEN FOWLER
Australia

www.haydenfowler.net

Second Nature

2008

Digital Video

36:20

Courtesy of the Artist

MICHAEL LIGHT
USA

<http://www.stillsgallery.com.au>

www.michaellight.net

Represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney
See website for international galleries

*A view of the moon captured at about 1000 miles
as the astronauts head back to earth*

1999

Direct-digital C print

Dimensions framed: 104 x 104 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery

STEPHEN HURREL
UK

<http://www.hurrelvisualarts.com>

Beneath and Beyond

2008

Audio visual installation

Courtesy of the Artist

Image Credit: Stephen Robinson, Tramway, Glasgow

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

COVER IMAGE: Michael Light

A view of the moon captured at about 1000 miles as the astronauts head back to earth, 1999

Series: *Full Moon Project*

Fuji Crystal Archive print, 100 x 100 cm, edition of 50

Copyright: Michael Light. Courtesy of the Artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney

ISBN: 978-0-9806231-3-0

DESIGN: Cath Robinson

EDITION: 400

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