

Lyrics to a Lyrebird

Dear Eugène,

From one artist to another, I'd like to say hello.

Marking approximately 123 years since your passing, I write to you from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung and Bunurong Boon Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation.¹ Lands that are rich in history, culture, and the enduring legacy of the First Nations peoples, whose deep connection to Country stretches back tens of thousands of years.

A place you once called home.

I write in an attempt to collaborate with you, weaving a process across time, contexts and mediums. I have been undergoing a process of absorbing and transmuting the delicate retelling of place in your 1867 lithograph, *Ferntree Gully, Dandenong Ranges*.² Much like the Lyrebirds in the bottom right-hand corner of your work, I seek to immerse myself in your lyrical retelling of place and interpret it anew. The shape, texture, colours and lines are to me what sounds in the environment are to the male Lyrebird in courtship and the female Lyrebird across various mimetic functions.³ These visual notes are the foundation from which I will reinterpret the landscape you have captured, stripping it back and ultimately reforming it.



Figure 1. Eugène von Guérard. *Ferntree Gully, Dandenong Ranges*, (1867).

¹ Candice Bruce, "Nothing Overlooked: The Studio of Eugene von Guerard," In *Memory & Oblivion: Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art*, Amsterdam, 1–7 September 1996.

² Figure 1. Eugène von Guérard. *Ferntree Gully, Dandenong Ranges*, (1867).

³ Anastasia H. Dalziell and Justin A. Welbergen, "Elaborate Mimetic Vocal Displays by Female Superb Lyrebirds," *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 4 (2016): 1, doi: 10.3389/fevo.2016.00034.

Ferntree Gully is in essence a sublime depiction, tangled in the shadows of colonial Australia.

Delving into your early life in Vienna and artistic education revealed that your skills and artistic practice were honed under a variety of mentors. The first being your father (a famed miniaturist), then the Italian landscape painter Giovanni Battista Bassi, and later your teachers and peers at the Dusseldorf Academy of Art.⁴ This spectrum of mentors and academic experience had a distinct impact on your visual style and approach to art, which embodies the very nature of German Romanticism.⁵ By definition, this combines notions of realism with a lingering touch of the spiritual from the Romantic period that pre-dated you. This lithograph, and your practice more broadly, is a textbook example of the German Romantic period where your wonder and love of exploration seep from your gestures of line and colour.⁶ It captures the essence of Romanticism, where the sublime and the natural world converge in a harmonious yet haunting dialogue.⁷

With your mark-making, refined within the European art canon, the next iteration of your life took place in Australia. But instead of pursuing your practice, you sought prosperity through the mining of gold.⁸ Arriving as a settler to the colonies in so-called Australia, the lure of extraction and wealth was not as lucrative as you had intended. It was at this turning point, that your commissions that captured the Australian landscape took hold.⁹ Through painting and image making you began to make a name for yourself in forming the colonial image of Australia.

I find it interesting how your journey into Australia began with the scarring of Country through digging and extracting, attempts at power and plunder. But instead, it led you to reconnect with your craft and capture Country with an explorative sense of beauty, both offer marks of permanence.

From the gold mines to the commissions on farming estates, image by image, you alongside your settled European contemporaries formed the sublime images of the landscape, underwritten by a dark, and violent history of extraction, exploitation and cruelty towards Country and the longest continuing culture of Australia's First Nations peoples.¹⁰

Your work found its way into Russell and Mab's Grimwade Collection, now housed within the University of Melbourne's Department of Museums and Collections. The collection ranging from books, art and ephemera paints a larger portrait of Australia's colonial past. It should be noted that the work of the Grimwade Collection team is evolving this dialogue for the present

⁴ Paul Fox, "Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed," *Australian Historical Studies* 43, 2 (2012): 303-311, doi:10.1080/1031461X.2012.677399.

⁵ Bruce, "Nothing Overlooked: The Studio of Eugene von Guerard," 1996.

⁶ Bruce, "Nothing Overlooked: The Studio of Eugene von Guerard," 1996.

⁷ Bruce, "Nothing Overlooked: The Studio of Eugene von Guerard," 1996.

⁸ Fox, "Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed," 310-311.

⁹ Fox, "Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed," 310-311.

¹⁰ Fox, "Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed," 310-311.

through the ongoing expansion of the collection to champion First Nations perspectives and artmaking processes from this period.¹¹

As someone of settler Scottish and Irish heritage, a few generations after your own, this tangled colonial mess and the subsequent past, present and future environmental degradation provide a foundation for me to strip back and reform as I contemplate the context of your sublime portrayal of Ferntree Gully. Through processes of mimicry and transmutation, I have attempted to create a work that is critical in its holding of space and consideration for something new. My process, while informed by your meticulous attention to detail, seeks to unravel and reconfigure the narrative you constructed, allowing space for a more nuanced and critical interpretation.

When it came to making the sculpture, it all began with Rob.

Rob is the Founder of Revival Projects in Yálla-birr-ang (also known as Collingwood), which reuses and repurposes local materials from the environment or industrial activity.¹² This particular piece of Planetree used for the centre of the sculpture was sourced from the tree maintenance of local arborists. In February 2024 before my University year started, I visited the Revival Projects workshop and collected an assortment of offcuts of Planetree, Ficus and Fig tree. These offcuts remained in my studio for a couple of months, waiting for the brain fog to lift and for inspiration to strike.

Seeing your work in person alongside my 2024 Miegunyah Project peers allowed for the initial forms of my sculptural response to begin to take shape. Your lithograph, with its intricate interplay of light and shadow, helped to ignite this process. The angular shapes in the pockets of clearing revealed the potential to be abstracted, reduced and expanded into the sculptural realm. The angular piece of Planetree sitting in the back corner of my studio proved to be a suitable building block for this.

As your traditional landscape process involves immersing yourself in the landscape, exposed to the exterior nature of things, I do the opposite.¹³ My practice takes me inward, to explore a space and interiority that can be likened to meditation, resulting in a finalised image in my mind of what I need to create. This acts as an idealised destination of where I'd like to take the work. Whilst it is a visual guide, it too is in a state of flux, which allows the material, the marks and the imperfections in the reclaimed wood to unfold in the work and influence the overall shape and form. I like to look at it as an act of co-creation. It is an attempt to allow for the hierarchies between my materials consisting of natural and non-natural origins, studio tools and artistic process to exist in a state of flux.

¹¹ Alisa Bunbury, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*. ed. Alisa Bunbury (Melbourne, Australia: The Miegunyah Press, 2020), 3-11.

¹² "What story do your materials tell?," Revival, Date accessed 21 July 2024, <https://revivalprojects.com.au/About-Manifesto>.

¹³ Bruce, "Nothing Overlooked: The Studio of Eugene von Guerard," 1996.

An example of this is the saw marks intentionally left on the sculpture, revealing crevasses and imperfect indentions in the sculptural body. Instead of stripping these sections back, leaning into them has proven generative in exposing the history of the material.

It was once a living tree, extracted from it's site of growth, only to be repurposed into another rendition of place.

The cyclical nature of extraction, reduction and abstraction of this material component of the work is an extension of the environment of my time. An extension that also reaches back into yours to reconfigure your retelling of place.

This blurring of hierarchies that dominate not only this work but also my practice, leans into theories surrounding ecofeminism and new materialism, championed by the philosophers Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti. Their philosophies offer a lens through which I can interrogate the material and conceptual boundaries within my work. Blurring these material hierarchies leans into the ecofeminist thought of Donna Haraway, employing "tentacular thinking" that challenges rigid euro-centric ideas of "human exceptionalism" and "bounded individualism" to present an alternative way of demonstrating ecological care.¹⁴

When it comes to new materialism, I align Rosi Braidotti's ideas on embracing an iterative process of re-materialization and de-materialization.¹⁵ The intertwining of this assortment of generative and non-generative materials seeks to embed and embody themselves with the ravages of environmental destruction that ensued from colonisation. So this tangle of material you see in this sculpture is not just the stripping back of the sublime that you've created in relation to Ferntree Gully, but is also an embodied state of the environmental situation that my present day is experiencing at large. And whilst the process of weaving this range of materials offers critique, it also seeks to embody a space of hopeful criticality, through which ecological possibilities can sprout.

The realm of ecofeminist and new materialism provide philosophical structures to critique the current state of environmental devastation, resulting from the trifecta of colonisation, patriarchy and capitalism. But I also acknowledge and recognize that First Nations communities are the true custodians of the lands that I am relating to in my work and they have been successfully caring for Country for more than 65,00 years.¹⁶

The site you refer to experienced its own form of environmental degradation. It saddens me to have read that the Ferntree Gully became a site of destruction and pollution as the 'Fern Mania'

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (New York: Duke University Press, 2016), 30 - 32.

¹⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 102.

¹⁶ Hans A Baer, "Indigenous Australians and engaged anthropologists: how can they struggle together for social justice and a safe climate?," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18, no. 2 (2022): 313-319.

experienced in the British colonies fed the demand for the extraction of ferns by botanical enthusiasts.¹⁷ This was also accompanied by picnicking pollution as the site and its ecology became a location of leisure. This is not to impart a question or blame, but I do wonder how you feel about the demand and destruction of this spot off the back of your artmaking process. After all, your original painting of *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges* (1857), was exhibited at the 1862 International Exhibition in London, coined by the press as “an illustration of one of the most picturesque aspects of scenery in Victoria.”¹⁸ It is no wonder that this reception of your work drove the masses to enjoy the beauty of Ferntree Gully. But in true colonial fashion, these settlers did so without respect and care for the landscape.¹⁹

This historical context of your capturing of the sublime and the consequential demand and degradation of place provides an interesting point of interrogation that I began to pick at in my sculptural response.

I set out by piercing, fracturing, and sanding back the dynamic between shape, line, object, and texture—all in an attempt to perforate your construction of the sublime while simultaneously mimicking it.

The gash in the centre of the sculpture is a gesture of excavation from this material, opening it up to allow the viewer to experience seeing through the work. This seeks to offer a space through which my material manipulation holds an abstracted and reduced space of ambiguity to experience the untethering of the sublime in your painterly depiction - both materially and through form. The act of piercing is both violent, bodily and physical in its construction. Doing so has opened space for consideration as to where the natural material begins and ends and where my intervention takes place.

Mimicry folds into this process. The slivers of clearing darting across the line, form and texture of your work provided a visual point in which the amalgamation and simplification of these elements were drawn through the body of the sculpture to form the central gash.

The repetitive drilling, chiselling and sanding for hours on end was exhausting. However, it is at this point of physicality that I find I enter a state of flow, where mind, body and soul move in unison, becoming with the surroundings and the material before me. I wonder, as you trekked, sat and sketched for hours on end, did you reach a point similar to this?

Another artist that I’m yet to write a letter to is Barbara Hepworth. You’ll find an appreciation of her practice within mine. She is a formative modernist sculptor that I derive a great deal of

¹⁷ Alison Inglis, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*. ed. Alisa Bunbury (Melbourne, Australia: The Miegunyah Press, 2020), 226.

¹⁸ Inglis, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*, 226.

¹⁹ Inglis, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*, 226.

inspiration from, particularly in her approach to capturing the landscape - something you might find interesting as well.

Barbara Hepworth, a formative modernist artist specialising in direct carving into wood, stone, and bronze, is a significant influence to me. In particular, it is the embodied relationality that exists in her works, which she beautifully puts: “it is love and it is a relation to mass, it is stone, and it is animate.”²⁰ Both her process of direct carving and the intention behind her works are incredibly generative to me. Her works, both abstract and reductionist, capture an immersive relationship with the landscape, becoming a vessel through which other’s eyes can begin to experience and contemplate.²¹ She wields ambiguity in her works with precision, care and vulnerability in a way that I dream of emulating.



Figure 2. Barbara Hepworth, in the Palais studio at work on the wood carving *Hollow Form with White Interior*, 1963.

²⁰ Florence, "Touching Gender: The Word, the Image and the Tactile. Barbara Hepworth's "Stereognostic" Sculpture," 272.

²¹ Florence, "Touching Gender: The Word, the Image and the Tactile. Barbara Hepworth's "Stereognostic" Sculpture," 273.

Another lover of woodwork was also found in Russell, who not only appreciated the craft but dabbled in it himself.²² In a 1955 essay titled ‘Craftsmanship,’ Russell described the work of a wood crafter as ‘the aristocrat of all tradesmen.’²³ Whilst I don’t agree with the implicit hierarchies in this sentiment, I can always appreciate when a craft of my own is championed.

Tying process and concept together, my sculptural response to your work is an attempt to offer ambiguity in its mimicry, allowing the viewers to slowly uncover the visual cues that have been drawn and transmuted from your landscape. My response to your work, titled *Lyrics to a Lyrebird*, attempts to draw you in to recognise with a sense of blurry-eyed confusion, the presence of ferns, clearing, shrubs and feathers.

Protruding from the back of the sculpture is wicker, which has been soaked and then shaped into imitations of the curves and biomorphic shapes of the Lyrebirds and ferns.

To transmute the texture and colour in your work, I’ve incorporated textiles from deconstructed jumpers and an assortment of yarn that made their way into my life through various means of gifting and second-hand shopping. Serendipitously these colours have managed to grasp at the misty, muted greens, blues and yellows that permeate your work. Knotting and hanging the yarn along the wicker are a way for me to draw and paint into space. All in an attempt at providing a glimpse into the ecology of Ferntree Gully mirroring itself amongst species.

²² Rebecca Edwards, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*. ed. Alisa Bunbury (Melbourne, Australia: The Miegunyah Press, 2020), 235.

²³ Edwards, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*. 235.



Figure 3. Imogen Kerr, *Lyrics to a Lyrebird*, 2024, Image by Ruben Bull-Milne.

The mimicry of the Lyrebird's song is an act of communion across an expanse of mimetic functions. Researchers Anastasia Dalziell and Justin Welbergen have more recently discovered that female Lyrebirds use mimicry while defending their nests from predators, by combining a tactical use of calls and physical attacks.²⁴ The mimicry of song used by female Lyrebirds in these moments most commonly incorporates the calls of two known birds of prey — the Collared Sparrowhawk and Grey Goshawk.²⁵

²⁴ Dalziell and Welbergen, "Elaborate Mimetic Vocal Displays by Female Superb Lyrebirds," 5.

²⁵ Dalziell and Welbergen, "Elaborate Mimetic Vocal Displays by Female Superb Lyrebirds," 5.



Figure 4. Imogen Kerr, *Lyrics to a Lyrebird*, 2024, Image by Ruben Bull-Milne.

The notion of mimicry as a biological process of defence and preservation is an interesting area for me to begin to tap into.²⁶ In mimicking the shapes of the Lyrebirds, ferns and colours in your work, I can't help but consider a desire for a protective quality. In reimagining the sublime, I hope to project a protective possibility of entangled materials, forms and colour, that is both critical of the past but also offers a hopeful sensitivity and care for the future of Ferntree Gully and ecologies at large.

And with that Eugène, thank you for your listening ear.
Please don't be a stranger.

With the kindest regards,
Imogen

²⁶ Dalziell and Welbergen, "Elaborate Mimetic Vocal Displays by Female Superb Lyrebirds," 5.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Eugène von Guérard. *Ferntree Gully, Dandenong Ranges (Victoria)*. 1867. Lithograph printed in ink, (sheet) 51.0 x 69.0 cm. The University of Melbourne Art Collection, The Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequests, Melbourne, Accession Number: 1973.0672.000.000.

Figure 2. Barbara Hepworth, *in the Palais studio at work on the wood carving Hollow Form with White Interior*. 1963. Black and white photograph of Barbara Hepworth carving into wood. Tate Britain, London.

Figure 3. Imogen Kerr. *Lyrics to a Lyrebird*. 2024. Reclaimed wood (Plane tree), beeswax, reclaimed yarn, wicker, steel, glue. 117cm x 59cm x 18cm. Image by Ruben Bull-Milne.

Figure 4. Imogen Kerr. *Lyrics to a Lyrebird*. 2024. Reclaimed wood (Plane tree), beeswax, reclaimed yarn, wicker, steel, glue. 117cm x 59cm x 18cm. Image by Ruben Bull-Milne.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baer, Hans A. "Indigenous Australians and engaged anthropologists: how can they struggle together for social justice and a safe climate?." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18, no. 2 (2022): 313-319.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022.
- Bruce, Candice. "Nothing Overlooked: The Studio of Eugene von Guerard." In *Memory & Oblivion: Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art, Amsterdam, 1–7 September, 1996*.
- Bunbury, Alisa. *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*. Edited by Alisa Bunbury. Melbourne, Australia: The Miegunyah Press, 2020.
- Dalziell, Anastasia H., and Justin A. Welbergen. "Elaborate Mimetic Vocal Displays by Female Superb Lyrebirds." *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 4 (2016): 1-4.
- Edwards, Rebecca. *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*. Edited by. Alisa Bunbury. Melbourne, Australia: The Miegunyah Press, 2020.
- Florence, Penny. "Touching Gender: The Word, the Image and the Tactile. Barbara Hepworth's "Stereognostic" Sculpture," in *Text and Visuality*, Edited by Martin Heusser, Michèle Hannoosh, Charlotte Schoell-Glass, and David Scott. Atlanta: BRILL, 1999.
- Fox, Paul. "Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed." *Australian Historical Studies* 43, 2 (2012): 303-311. doi:10.1080/1031461X.2012.677399.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. New York: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Inglis, Alison. *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*. Edited by Alisa Bunbury. Melbourne, Australia: The Miegunyah Press, 2020.