

# Working the **Waters**

Curated by **ANN FINEGAN**



**TERRY BURROWS**  
**TINA HAVELOCK STEVENS**  
**CHRISTINE MCMILLAN**  
**SUE PEDLEY**  
**JOSEPHINE STARRS &**  
**LEON CMIELEWSKI**

 **MUDGEE**  
ARTS  
PRECINCT

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*Working the Waters*  
Curated by Ann Finegan  
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Cover image: Tina Havelock Stevens  
*Thunderhead*, 2016

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# Working the Waters

Curated by **ANN FINEGAN**

Showcasing Nature in its grandeur, in the vastness of its magnitude and the splendour of the sublime, the artists in *Working the Waters* explore the collective actions of humanity's engagement with water across a broad range of planetary locales. Predominantly delivered at cinematic scale, this exhibition of moving image and installation works ranges from thrill-seekers putting themselves into barrels over Niagara Falls, to mining corporations causing a river to run red with pollutants in Tasmania, decades after leaving a denuded moonscape behind. From North America to the Indo-Pacific, this exhibition tracks how water is worshipped, adored and admired but also traded, trashed, put to work, feared and taken for granted.

Contamination runs deep and largely unseen in Sue Pedley's *Copper Ships* (2011), a duo of video landscapes that follows the trail of copper ore mined in Tasmania to the smelters on the islands of Japan's Seto Inland Sea, high up in the Northern Hemisphere. In a double act of cinematic widescreen, the waters of Teshima Island's misty harbour, surrounded by green, wooded hills, create a pleasing complement to the leafy, rainforest footage of Tasmania's King River. But for the clue of the abandoned houses in its fishing village documented on a smaller video screen, you'd never pick that Teshima, now remediated, had been an illegal toxic waste dump from 1970 to 1990 – or that the villagers had fished in contaminated waters impacted by the copper smelter on the neighbouring island of Naoshima. Post-World War II, Naoshima's smelter had been a major customer for Tasmanian copper ore.

Pedley uncovers the links of this global trade in contamination whose parallel legacies can, strangely, still be read in the landscape. In Queenstown, Tasmania, a moonscape testifies to a history of toxic leachate from the copper mines, while on Naoshima, denuded parts of the island reveal the lingering impacts of the smelter.

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Image: Sue Pedley *Copper Ships* 2011

Yet, bizarrely, the copper mining finished, residents of Queenstown are pulling up revegetation in order to preserve the barren landscape now foundational to their tourist industry. And their formerly named Queen River, now bearing the moniker Red River, has been left to flow a rusty colour from the mining contaminants still leaching into its waters. At the junction where the King and Red Rivers merge, Pedley has captured on film, how, remarkably, for a short distance the pristine waters of the King River can be seen running alongside waters that are polluted red.

Call it human psychology or human folly, the human capacity for turning a blind eye and seeing only so far within a limited circumference – and not the broader environmental impacts – never ceases to astound. Since 1972, when the crew of Apollo 17 took what was to become the most distributed photograph ever of the Earth – the cloud-covered ‘Blue Marble’ – humanity has been aware of whole-planet environmental consciousness and the interconnectedness of its systems. And yet, collectively, even with this awareness, humanity is a strange mob, whose actions, taken together, remain contradictory, paradoxical and destructive.





Image: Christine McMillan *Holding Ponds* 2023

Literally grounding the exhibition, the fragile clay vessels that compose Christine McMillan's *Holding Ponds* (2023) are, like Pedley's videos, charmingly disarming, engaging the audience with their array of delicate unfired bowls resembling an aerial view of rock holes in the western desert, or natural clay pans that fill with water after good rains. Some of the vessels are cracked and stained as the liquid contained within each bowl makes its way through the unfired clay, and over time, this discolouration intensifies as more of the contents seep through. The wall text reveals that the title *Holding Ponds* is a reference to the extraction industry's use of clay-bottomed dams to hold mining waste. The liquid in McMillan's bowls is a mixture of oil and coal dust, remembered from the holding dams she walked alongside in her youth when visiting her grandparents who lived close to the colliery at Wollongong, where, incidentally, her grandfather worked. Photos from the era confirm her memories: nothing would grow in the vicinity of the ponds. Underneath, unseen, the contaminated seepage was moving through the groundwater. Calling attention to the frequent catastrophic failure of these dams, *Holding Ponds* brings the toxic leaks and stains to the surface and into presence of mind.

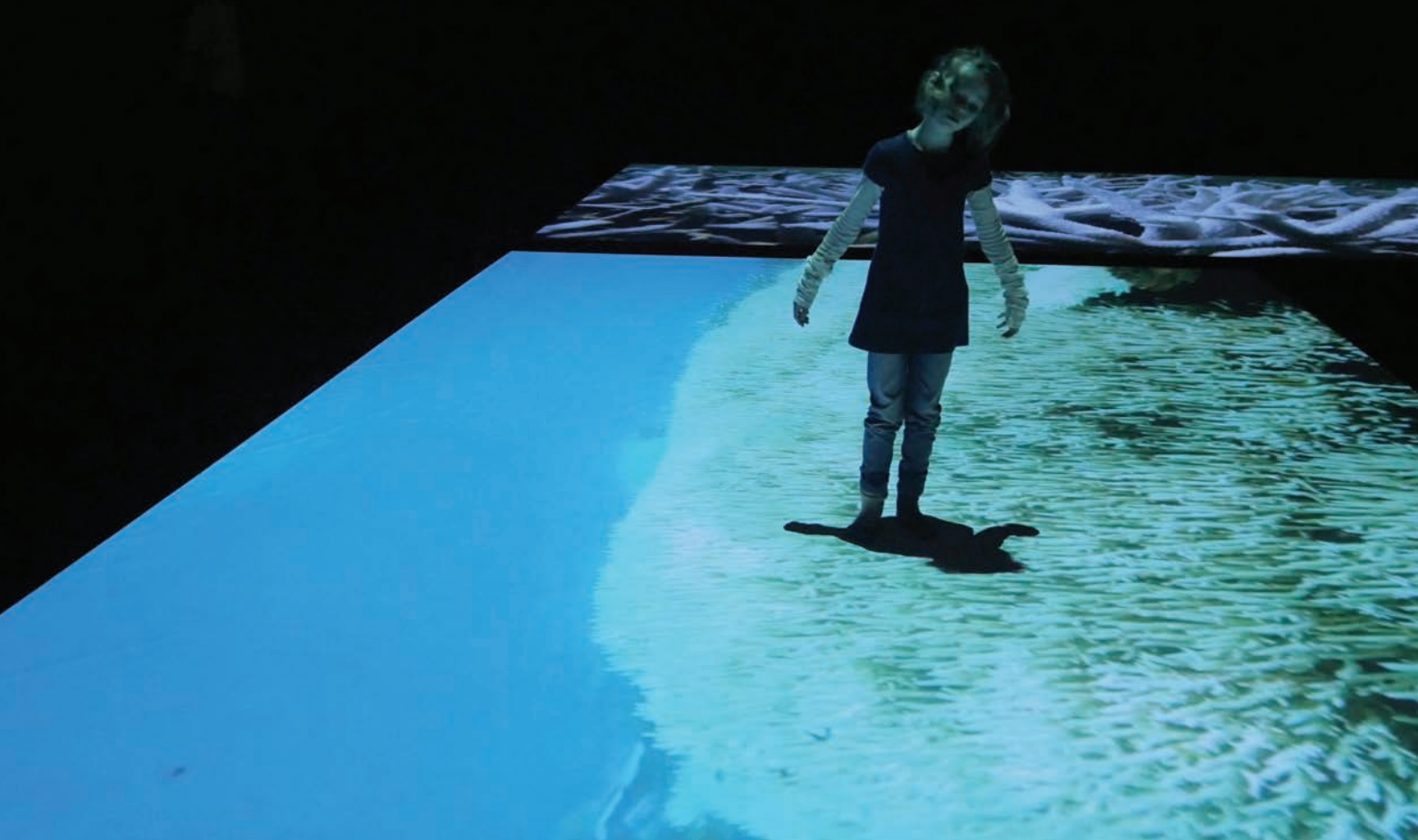


Image: Josephine Starrs & Leon Cmielewski *And the Earth Sighed* 2016

*And the Earth Sighed* (2016), by Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski, consists of an overhead floor projection in which sections of the vast river-scape of the Murray-Darling system are exhibited across the floor. With a practice described as “situated at the juncture of cinema, information visualisation and sublime landscape”<sup>1</sup> *And the Earth Sighed* trades on the affects accorded by the God’s eye view, whilst, paradoxically, the installation also places the audience on the riverbank, on the projection that is literally underfoot. The dry sections look as if they have been scuffed out by a careless or indifferent shoe, and in that aspect alone, function as a metaphor for human intervention into the natural flows of the river. Floodplain harvesting, for example, or over-allocation of water licenses upstream. Starrs and Cmielewski don’t track or quantify these specific impacts. Rather, their mode of information visualisation affords the audience the rare opportunity of immersion within the broader system of the rivers, eliciting an emotional response to its evident fragility. Randomly embedded symbols and text appear shaping up in the formations of the river-scape as if the river and the land were alive and attempting to communicate the impacts of human action. Flood follows drought in highly detailed aerial views and the audience literally brings their own imprint – and responsibility – to bear on the landscape.

1. josephinestarrs.com





Image: Josephine Starrs & Leon Cmielewski *And the Earth Sighed* 2016

But, *And the Earth Sighed* also includes a cautionary tale, suggestive of a sigh of abandonment, as if the Earth is giving up after her attempts to warn us – through signs of collapsed ecosystems, and, in particular, through the dry river beds and empty lakes of the Murray-Darling zone where human action has deprived the rivers of environmental flows. The all-too-familiar list goes on like a roll call of human indifference or incapacity to collectively act – or simply think straight. It's as if humankind has failed to see that the Earth is a living system, an entity that, of necessity, reacts and responds.

So, at the end of journey of the Murray-Darling River System, at the river mouth near the Coorong, in South Australia, a giant wave washes across the projection, obliterating the landscape, and, by corollary, any of the people living in it. Unmistakably the message of *And the Earth Sighed* is that with warming oceans, the natural systems of the planet, will readjust, recalibrate and reset – indifferent to the plight of humans. And, sadly, as if in affirmation of the modelling of contemporary climate science upon which this work is based, catastrophic floods along the Murray-Darling indeed followed catastrophic drought in 2022.

If, in addition to planetary pressures of warming, the Murray-Darling River System is overtaxed under the current water trading regulations and environmentally neglected through





Image: Terry Burrows *Ganga Ganguddy 1* (2019)

lack of sustainable flows, by contrast the holy mother River Ganges in Varanasi, India, is under threat from an excess of devotion. Authorities are struggling to manage the health of the river: the numbers, the refuse, the plethora of animals that come daily to drink (monkeys, dogs, herds of cows and buffalo) and the high spiritual importance of the site. This begs the question of under whose authority could religious practices that have endured for centuries, if not millennia, be subjected to some form of curtailment?

*Ganga Ganguddy 1* (2019) by Terry Burrows contrasts the serene waters of Ganguddy in Wollemi National Park, regional NSW, with the crowded activity of the annual Chhath Puja (a Hindu festival celebrating the sun god Surya) along the broad steps and platforms lining the banks of the Ganges. Amid the coloured saris, secular activities of shaving, washing, dressing, and cooking on makeshift fires, take place alongside ritual prayers and the pouring of libations. There is no unoccupied space as the camera slowly glides down the river. Everywhere, along the banks, the river is awash with garlands, ash and waste. And in other Hindu festivals, effigies of various deities, decorated and painted with toxic materials are ritually thrown into the water, adding to the general pollution and accumulations of heavy metals. Unburnt remains from funeral pyres, for lack of affordability of wood, regularly expire in the centre of the river.





Image: Terry Burrows *Ganga Ganguddy 2* (2019)

Burrows, having completed a number of projects in Varanasi, says he produced such works not to highlight the evident environmental pollution but to indicate the spiritual and sensory phenomena these festivities offer, not only for the locals and pilgrims but for tourists (including artists) alike. Nonetheless, in seeming contradiction these celebrations would not be as evocative if the local polluted environment were not seen as an active part of the whole. Though the washing of clothes in the Ganges has now been discouraged and electric crematoriums have been installed, these initiatives have been to no avail.

From close-ups of rock and textured skin, a decrepit buffalo is slowly revealed in the companion video of *Ganga Ganguddy 2* (2019). Covered in sores and obviously ill, the animal lies awkwardly, chewing its cud, on the steps by the Ganges. Occasionally seeming to stare down into the reflection of the clear waters at Ganguddy below, it symbolically represents the present condition of the Ganges. On a third screen, running waters flow around a long denuded ridge over which a camera pans. De-peopled and bearing few signs of vegetation, the abstracted landscape of *Unstable Rorschach* (2023) hints at a post-human future and recalls the bare rock and toxic acid lakes of the volcanic mountains of South America. People don't live there.





Image: Tina Havelock Stevens *The Rapids* 2019

Humanity's conflicted attitude to water is reflected in Tina Havelock Stevens's *The Rapids* (2019), a collage of her drumming performances, archival footage, and found images from multiple locations around the world, including the Philippines, the principal location of this work. In this complex two-screen installation people put themselves into precarious situations. Often you don't know whether people are leaping into raging waters for fun or drowning. A brown bear in the midst of a Canadian river demonstrates prowess at salmon catching. In manipulated, surrealist footage, shoals of fish swim into each other from opposite directions across a concrete bar. This is suggestive of what Aboriginal people call 'reversal of the rivers' – flows released from human-made dams at the wrong time for the natural rhythms of spawning. Floodwaters carry a house away. In early 20th-century Paris, hundreds of people line up for a swimming race and dive into the Seine, an action that, in consideration of pollution and industrial waste, few people would consider nowadays.

Havelock Stevens' performance at Charlie's Point, at the mouth of the Aquang River, where the dropping of napalm in Coppola's Vietnam War epic *Apocalypse Now* (1979) was filmed, reflects the confusion of those contradictory attitudes to water: in a series of actions marked by hesitancy and conflicting impulses her drumming alternatively hits its stride, breaks off, picks up again, changes trajectory, halts again, and so forth. She



gets up, sits down, wanders off again, and dives into the water, which, meanwhile, has been slowly swamping the drum kit as the tide comes in. Whereas in previous performances Havelock Stevens settled into a distinctive set of beats and rhythms channelling particular energies of place – a jumbo jet graveyard in the desert (*Ghost Class* 2015), drumming underwater at MONA (*Submerge* 2013) and sampling the decaying city of Detroit (*Drummer Detroit* 2013) – in *The Rapids* her playing falters as if in acknowledgement of the uncertain agendas surrounding her. Just how do you respond when the water levels rise? Swim or pray? If anything is certain in *The Rapids*, it is the inconsistency of human actions and impulses. So many times over, humanity's mismatches with Nature continue to repeat.

*Thunderhead* (2016), also by Havelock Stevens, presents the towering spectacle of a Texas storm cell, randomly encountered on a drive across America. Remarkably the rain pours down in a circle of apparent self-containment, and, filmed from a point of safety (her car), the experience is sublime. Were the phenomenon a twister or a tornado the accelerator would be flat to the floor. But even so, given the altered conditions of climate change, are we now beginning to view events like this storm cell a little differently, perhaps with more apprehension, principally from the perspective of increased 'energy in the system'? Or, more simply put, have we become more wary? Our admiration for the spectacles of Nature might not be diminished but has our nervousness increased?

*Working the Waters* explores human engagements with water from the point of view of human psychology: our affections and our attachments. But, alarmingly, our capacity for cognitive dissonance – the holding of conflicting beliefs, or, in other words, knowing what is right but doing the opposite – is demonstrated over and over. Nonetheless, humans, it seems, love being with water. A 1994 survey of America's Most Wanted Painting, by artists Komar & Melamid, affirmed that more than 44% of respondents preferred the colour blue and 49% favoured outdoor scenes of lakes, rivers and oceans. This pattern repeated in surveys of more than a hundred other countries. Yet, as a species, when we love water so much, why don't we collectively take more care?

## **ANN FINEGAN**

Exhibition Curator

*Working the Waters* explores human engagements with water from the point of view of human psychology: our affections and our attachments.

**ANN FINEGAN** is a writer, educator and curator who divides her time between Kandos and Sydney. In 2013 she co-founded Cementa Contemporary Arts Festival.

In respect of climate change and environmental degradation we all know the drill: we've been very well informed on what needs to be done. Yet a question remains of how humanity as a species, dare I say collective, continues to fail on these accounts.



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