

4 November 2017 To 11 February 2018 ARTSPACE MACKAY, MACKAY REGIONAL COUNCIL

GREAT BARRIER REEF | ANTHROPOCENE PROJECT

Emma Lindsay



Foreword

In her current exhibition, *Great Barrier Reef /Anthropocene project* Emma Lindsay poses a series of questions about the state of endangered and vulnerable species in the wet tropical region of Queensland.

Lindsay, an artist living and working in Brisbane, actively explores the intersection of climate change and the catalysts for action. In this project she uses a diverse array of materials and aesthetic approaches — Lindsay is primarily a painter but has now delved into other media such as digital photography and video. All of the artworks she has created are connected by an ongoing intuitive and intellectual curiosity about her surroundings. Lindsay's work is never self-centred indeed, she is an artist who seems to be constantly and consistently looking out at the world.

It can be said that environmental harmony works with remarkable efficiency and should continue to do so as long as it is not tampered with. Nature is an infinitely diverse mosaic. Every specimen animals, plants, fungi, even bacteria— has a part to play in the creation of the environment that has taken thousands of millions of years to develop into what we live in now. But humans have changed the equilibrium of the natural world to a critical point, endangering this diversity of life. Lindsay's works grapple with the question of how we sustain wildness in a human world. Her work recognizes the paradoxical nature of human efforts to both control and to conserve wildlife.

The natural world has long held our fascination, but concepts such as global warming and climate change have altered our perception of nature, which today is rarely depicted in simple romantic terms. This exhibition is at its most provocative when viewed with both the mind and the eye. Lindsay's images explore the gap between our idealised vision of nature and our actual experience of it, making visible the fantastic diversity of wildlife that are threatened in an alarming way by the current socio-political climate. Her spotlight on these extraordinary species shows just how much we have to lose if do not advocate for effective and inspired action on saving the environment.

Julie Skate

Gallery Director, Artspace Mackay, Mackay Regional Council



Emma LINDSAY *Strawberry hermit crab, Lady Elliot Island 2017. Oil on board, 24 x 29cm.*

Q&A with Emma Lindsay

***JS:** You grew up on the edge of the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. Are there childhood memories, visual or otherwise, that have stayed with you?*

EL: I grew up in Raymond Terrace, a small Hunter Valley town bordering the Williams and Hunter Rivers. It was one of the first sites they tried to grow wine grapes after the region was colonised by the British but in my childhood was renowned only as a notorious bottleneck for travellers going up the coast every school holidays. The urge to travel, engage with animals and the environment, was imprinted upon my mind from an early age. My first sighting of Van Gogh and Monet paintings in a newsagent magazine one holiday sparked the desire to draw at an early age. Raiding my father's work stationery cupboard so I could copy my mother's sci-fi book and fantasy covers became a coping strategy-first to stave off the relentless boredom of school holidays at home, later to escape the realities of an increasingly difficult family life.

Certain images have stayed with me for a lifetime. Holding my first snowball atop Mt Kosciusko one wet summer. Peering within a darkened box to see the wizened body of a tiny pharaoh mummy at the British Museum, the sting of green nettles on a bare leg, feeling the soft brown fur of a pussy willow between my fingers, finding frog bones in an enormous skeletal tree buried in snow, spotting an ancient chalk horse from a train window in England. Fishing with my grandfather along vast stretches of beach at Mungo Lakes-chasing a cheeky dingo to retrieve a bait bucket, stumbling upon huge ancient aboriginal pipi middens atop giant sand dunes, spotting dolphins cruising in rip infested surf, trying to save caught bream and whiting from their slow hessian death by immersing the sack in a bucket of seawater. The cacophony and colours of neighbourhood birds dodging magpie attacks. Walking home lobster red from the local pool through shimmering air and melting tar roads in sweltering heat. The diverse palette of green seen along the NSW coast during 12-hour train rides from Newcastle to Grafton, and the welcoming mass lavender carpet of Jacaranda blooms as we drove into my great Aunt's driveway. Fruit bat vampires flying overhead and massacring perfect almost-ripe mangos. Red nail polish scorpions hand painted on my

Aunt's LP record covers. The invisible threat of 110 hammerhead sharks closing my favourite beach one summer. Dodging wind-blown tangled ribbon stingers of a mass blue bottle colony. Walking the eerie empty streets of Newcastle, streets cleared of people and cars and covered by the detritus of collapsed buildings after the earthquake. My childhood memories remind me of the thrill of wild animal encounters, the beauty and terror of the natural world, and how normal life can be ruptured by Nature into a state of emergency at any time.

***JS:** You completed your PhD at RMIT in 2016. How did it impact your development as a painter?*

EL: The PhD gave me the first opportunity to have the space, time and finances to develop and deliver a long-term practice-led research project dependent upon a large group of paintings and scientific data. My Extinction Project required interdisciplinary research across the fields of visual art, science and history, as well as undertaking substantial travel fieldwork that required the permission and co-operation of multiple staff members at global museum zoological collections. At the same time my paintings were exploring studio approaches to forms of mark making that (for me) are simultaneously realist and abstract and relate to the textural formal medium of painting medium itself. As a painter I'm looking for ways to create relationships between glazing techniques, in tandem with the lush and often unpredictable outcomes of thick impasto oil paint. After I finished my PhD project I realised I want to undertake long-term interrelated projects involving an eco-critical, interdisciplinary and intermedia art practice approach that explore the multifaceted extinction and global warming crises of the Anthropocene. To create exhibition 'environments' allowing a viewer to have an intimate experience with the global species and landscapes I've visualised from the scientific data collected during hands-on fieldwork. My studio and exhibition outcomes are deliberately designed to contrast traditional slow painting surfaces alongside the faster experiential technologies of digital photography and video.



Emma LINDSAY *Pink snapper + prawns (discarded fishing boat carcasses on beach)* 2017. Oil on Gessobord, 70 x 95cm.



Emma LINDSAY *Female Cassowary, Etty Bay*
2017. Oil on Gessobord, 50 x 65 cm.

JS: You are obviously a highly creative artist and yet your first career choice was as an actor. What caused you to make the change from performing to visual arts? It clearly wasn't about job security! When did you begin making art?

EL: I told you that?! (laughing). Acting was one 'career' I tried amongst many after moving away to the big city and learning what other creative possibilities were on offer. It was fun for a while, but when I was more interested in drawing classmates at acting school over learning lines, my true interest became obvious.

Art had been a priority subject for me all throughout primary and high school, but I'd only ever seen art reproductions in books. It wasn't considered a proper job in my world, and the original goal was to become a lawyer. The deterioration of my home life during Year 12 meant all goals were impossible for the next few years. For a while I worked in hospitality and did a degree in history, thinking of going on to do law. By chance I moved in with two Fine Art students in Sydney and rediscovered art again. I started making gouache on paper paintings of brightly coloured nudes in beach or bush landscapes, usually with a watchful bird.

It took a while to have the courage and a flexible job that could support art school, and was accepted into the Bachelor of Fine Art degree at the National Art School. My study ended up being extended across a number of institutions over many years including the College of Fine Arts, and the Queensland College of Art, and I also had a child in this period. It took me a long time to absorb and process the teaching of many different painters and practice 'options' that were possible in contemporary art, and figure out my own direction as a painter. The teaching and advice offered by the painters Jude Rae, Del Kathryn Barton, Alan Oldfield, Peter Sharp, Louise Fowler-Smith, Jenny Watson, Mostyn Bramley-Moore, and Julie Fragar during art school helped me to figure out the artist I wanted to be. Once committed as a painter, I never looked back.

JS: How do you feel about allowing oneself to make mistakes. Can you talk about the idea of failed paintings and is that a part of your process?

EL: Mistakes have been important to my development as an artist, and are a part of life in the studio. To push into new territory outside of your comfort zone, with a willingness to fail or succeed, is vital to long-term professional development. To restart, rework, or destroy a painting can be bloody awful, especially when expensive supports, paints, limited finances and deadlines are at stake. However, mistakes often make me work harder to resolve paintings problems with more efficiency and awareness over time. As my paintings are both an original drawing and finished painting in one, each painting is an exploration of new territory and this can sometimes leave less room for error. Some mistakes become failed paintings that are destroyed outright: the mistake is unredeemable or the painting is simply not working and I want to try a different composition as a solution. Other failures needed time to sit in the studio for a year or longer before I've figured out how to finish it. Sometimes what I see as a 'mistake' painting is considered an accomplished painting by others! However, having exhibited a number of times now I find that if a painting is really bothering me, it should not leave the studio or be shown unless resolved.

***JS:** Despite the fact that you talk about your acceptance of a 'failed' painting, I feel that each one of your paintings that I have seen is so beautifully considered, and has a sense of quality. Do you think about 'quality' when you create?*

EL: My paintings are very considered, though the issue of quality for me encompasses a number of complex considerations beyond the 'quality' of a finished painting. There's the quality of encounter captured in the original photographic images selected, revealing a perspective that is less common or surprising about a species or animal behaviour in nature, but which also works as a painted image. A photograph may translate differently as an underpainting that may or may not work as a painting composition, so editing is an ongoing process until I have a group of underpaintings that work well together visually. Each finished painting also needs to have the right 'quality' to be kept for an exhibition. There are finished paintings that 'fail' to work as part



Emma LINDSAY *Silver gull + baby Green turtle, Heron Island 2017*. Oil on board, 34 x 44cm.
Emma LINDSAY *Red-tailed tropic bird, Lady Elliot Island 2017*. Oil on board, 34 x 44cm.



Emma LINDSAY *Northern Buller's albatross (long-line hook caught in gastro-intestinal tract)* 2017. Oil on Gessobord, 65 x 50 cm. Supplied research image: David Stewart.

of a group for exhibition that may work fine on their own. However, for an exhibition I carefully consider how each painting relates to the other, editing the selection to reveal a conversation between works. The selected group will reveal unique and particular emotional qualities I want to convey regarding my encounters with a species in a particular environment. There is a totally different quality of energy and colour in rendering life and it's been an exciting studio adventure to make each live subject into a painting for this show. One minute I'm painting a bird, the next recreating coral and algae! I'd also never realised how many sea creatures have complex patterning on their skins and shells. Doing them justice adds a whole other weight of quality to studio decision-making!

JS: Are there any artists who you admire and why?

EL: There are painters I look to when working, for motivation, help, or solutions to studio problems. Lisa Yuskavage is my colour guru. Louise Hearman reveals issues of psychological compositions and mastery of light with a single brushmark. Jenny Watson's determination, punk rules in paint and in life reminds me to keep taking risks.

Ultimately, I want my paintings to have the kind of time, consideration and looking as seen in Lucian Freud's slow psychological painting methods, imbedding layers of a person in paint over years. Cy Twombly's absolute freedom in paint expression is a key painting goal down the track. However, right now the interdisciplinary and intermedia practices of Pierre Huyghe and Mark Dion are motivating me to challenge my current practice explorations between media of paint, photography and video. Their work has found a way to incorporate human history, issues of art, the Anthropocene and Nature directly into their intermedia installations. John Wolseley's painting/drawings engage with these issues also but with a focus on more traditional media. His recent show at NGV had paper imbedded with feathers and marks from the landscape as well as his own hands- it was deeply moving work that still resonates for me.

JS: I am intrigued by your interest in Cy Twombly an artist who used "low" art practices such as pencilled words and scribble crayons, which seems on

the face of it diametrically opposed to your painting practice. Why else does he, apart from the aforementioned freedom in paint expression, interest you?

EL: My obsession with Twombly paintings began in art school but it's hard to put the why into words. He's such a painters' painter, a master of white. Yet he's dabbled also in the media of photography and sculpture. Importantly, he found his own path through the development of a unique personal mark-making language that for me stands out in the Modernist canon: the traces of realism and Nature amongst the abstraction; symbols and human historical text references; and exquisite colour. While cerebral on one level, his works are also so intimate and scrappy! You can see the fingerprints and smears, his thought processes, even what he's been reading in the mark making, personal trace and information transcribed on the canvas. A tiny glint of graphite winking in the grey background had me walking around his 'Treatise of the Veil' (1970) for an hour trying to work out what he had done and how when I saw it in New York. His retrospective in London provided an incredible and overwhelming sensory and emotional experience in paint, line and colour. There are few painters whose work moves me to this degree, but Twombly makes work I want to pore over and spend time with, understand.

I'm obsessed with drawn/painted marks and combining the two on a canvas (whether in 'low' or 'high' media), and Twombly excelled at this. At present my painting projects are focused on a realist subject perspective, the paintings are made over structured detailed drawings. However, as a painter I have always been torn between a desire to represent what I see in the world with integrity and pushing the boundaries of that visual representation towards a more expressive abstract language of my own. Twombly reminds me of the painter I want to be when or if the time becomes right.

Great Barrier Reef | Anthropocene Project

List of works

Emma LINDSAY

Born 1973, Newcastle, New South Wales.

Lives Brisbane, Queensland.

1 bag sea glass (1 island, 2 walks, 2 days, Lady Elliot Island), found sea glass collected from beach walks around entire island.

1 bag plastics (1 walk, 1 hour, One Tree Coconut Beach, Lizard Island) 2017. Digital photograph on Hahnemühle paper. 55 x 64cm.

Endangered Green turtle (hatchling), Heron Island 2017. Digital photograph on Hahnemühle paper. 55 x 64cm (1/3).

Endangered Green turtle (unviable embryo), Heron Island 2017. Digital photograph on Hahnemühle paper. 55 x 64cm (2/3).

Endangered Green turtle (viable & unviable egg casings), Heron Island 2017. Digital photograph on Hahnemühle paper. 55 x 64cm (3/3).

Zooplankton (crab larvae) under microscope, Australian Institute of Marine Sciences 2017. Oil on linen/Dibond, 19.5 x 24cm.

Red-tailed tropic bird, Lady Elliot Island 2017. Oil on board, 34 x 44cm.

Steephead parrotfish, cleaner wrasse + dead coral, Cairns Outer Reefs 2017. Oil on board, 34 x 44cm.

Phyllidia exquisita nudibranches on dead coral, Lizard Island 2017. Oil on board, 24 x 29cm.

Crown of Thorns starfish, Lizard Island Research Station 2017. Oil on Gessobord, 34.5 x 34.5cm.

Fish parasite (Gnathia aureamaculosa), Lizard Island Research Station 2017. Oil on Gessobord, 14 x 14cm.

Hard corals (regrowing and dead, Lizard Island) 2017. Oil on board, 34 x 44cm.

Silver gull + baby Green turtle, Heron Island 2017. Oil on board, 34 x 44cm.

Strawberry hermit crab, Lady Elliot Island 2017. Oil on board, 24 x 29cm.

Acropora millepora (dead and regrowth hard corals with algae, Lizard Island November 2016) 2017. Oil on linen, 119cm x 152.5cm.

Humphead Maori wrasse, Whitsundays 2017. Oil on board, 54 x 95cm.

Female Cassowary, Etty Bay 2017. Oil on Gessobord, 50 x 65 cm.

Eungella Honeyeater 2017. Oil on linen, 80 x 34cm.

Pink snapper + prawns (discarded fishing boat carcasses on beach) 2017. Oil on Gessobord, 70 x 95cm.

Northern Buller's albatross (long-line hook caught in gastro-intestinal tract) 2017. Oil on Gessobord, 65 x 50 cm. Supplied research image: David Stewart.

Great Barrier Reef | Anthropocene Project: Art + Science species encounters on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef + Wet Tropics Coastal Regions: Fieldwork Research | Artist Book, Blurb Publishing (Book + PDF format).

GBR Fieldwork Encounters (9 mths > 2 hrs) 2017. Single channel digital video, Time length: 1:54:27.



Emma LINDSAY *Acropora millepora (dead and regrowth hard corals with algae, Lizard Island November 2016)* 2017. Oil on linen, 119cm x 152.5cm.

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FREE ENTRY 10am-5pm Tuesday-Friday / 10am-3pm Weekends (Closed Mondays)



Emma Lindsay's 'Great Barrier Reef | Anthropocene Project' is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland. Creative Sparks is a joint initiative of Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.