




# fireworks

tracing the incendiary in Australian art

GAVIN WILSON



cover: Tim Storrier *The ladder* 1993 (detail)  
acrylic on canvas  
243.8 x 304.8 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

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GAVIN WILSON

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Brian Rogers *Trash glow II* 2003  
digitised print on paper  
69.0 x 89.0 cm  
Collection: Australian Sugar Industry Museum

## Preface

Robert Heather  
*Director, Artspace Mackay*

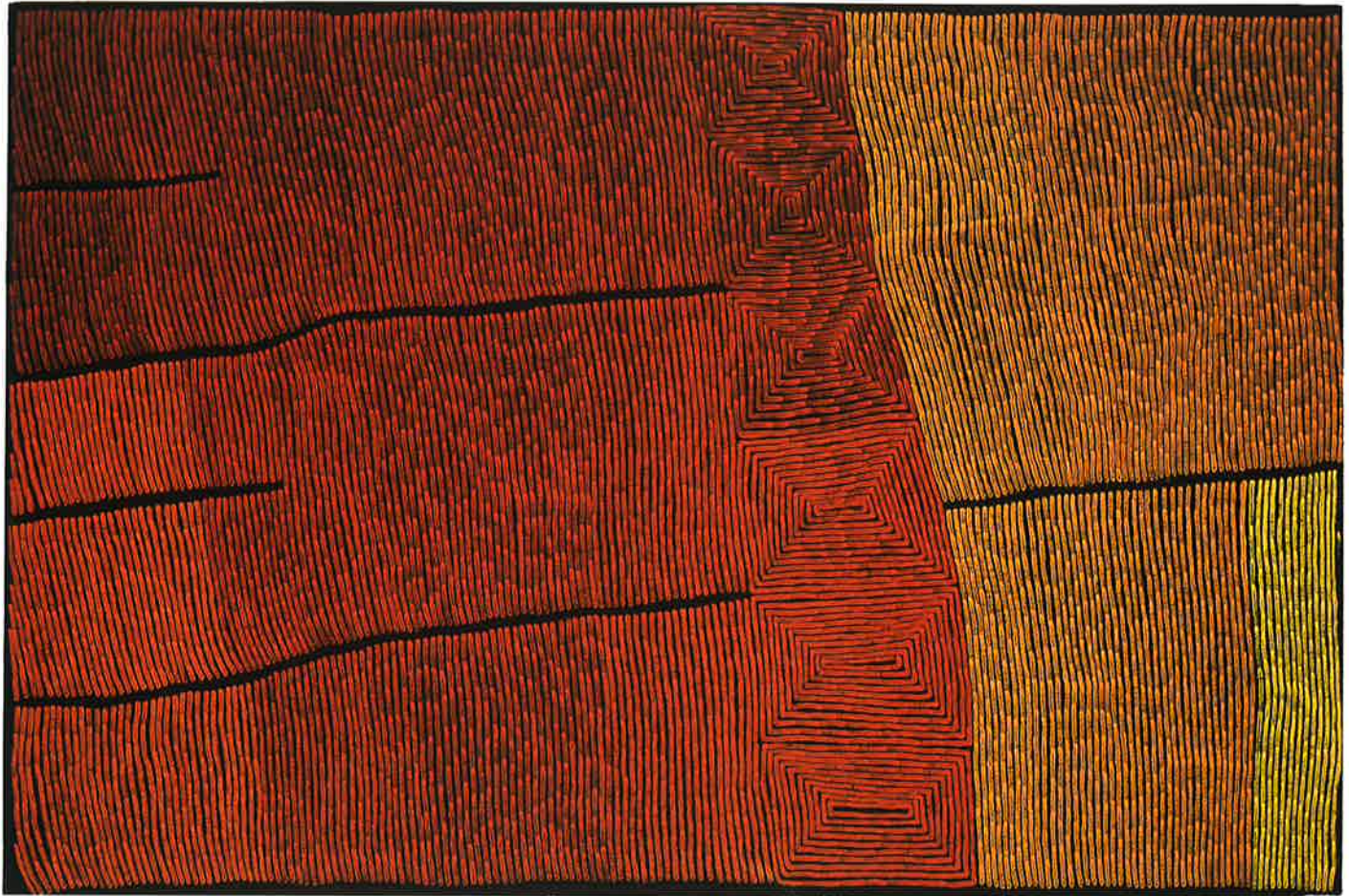
In Australia, fire has a number of distinct connotations. In the natural world, fire is an integral stage in the life cycle of the great eucalypt forests. The indigenous people incorporated fire in their land management practices and rituals. However, the white settlers and their heirs have had more trouble coming to terms with its power.

Every summer we are regaled with stories of tragedy and courage as the bushfire season takes hold. The dedication of volunteer firefighters and the generosity and resilience shown in the aftermath of the devastation are part of our folklore. For generations, wood-fired Besser block barbecues and backyard incinerators were urban icons that are now almost wholly extinct. Every year, our smoke-filled northern horizons signal the onset of the sugar harvest with its blazing cane fires and the billowing stacks of the mills, powerful symbols of a cultural traditions threatened by globalisation.

This exhibition explores the role of fire in Australia's visual arts. For performing artists, from ubiquitous fire-twirling buskers to the choreography of the massive ceremony that heralds the New Year at the Woodford Folk Festival, the drama of fire can enhance or even embody the spectacle. Visual artists have also had a long history of interpreting and exploring the role of fire – as a source of inspiration and even, in some cases, as a means of creation.

This is the first major touring exhibition to explore this theme and will be seen in a number of regional and metropolitan public galleries. I would like to thank Gavin Wilson for his efforts in researching and curating the exhibition; Dr Alan Krell for his essay; the artists involved; the institutions and collectors who have kindly loaned works; and the staff at Artspace Mackay and at Museum and Gallery Services Queensland.

Thanks also to the following funding bodies for their support—the Visions of Australia program, the Gordon Darling Foundation and the Thomas Foundation. It is the support of such organisations that enables regional galleries to develop and tour exhibitions of national significance .



Ronnie Tjampitjinpa (*Bushfire*) 2003  
acrylic on linen  
202.0 x 305.0 cm  
Private collection, courtesy of Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane



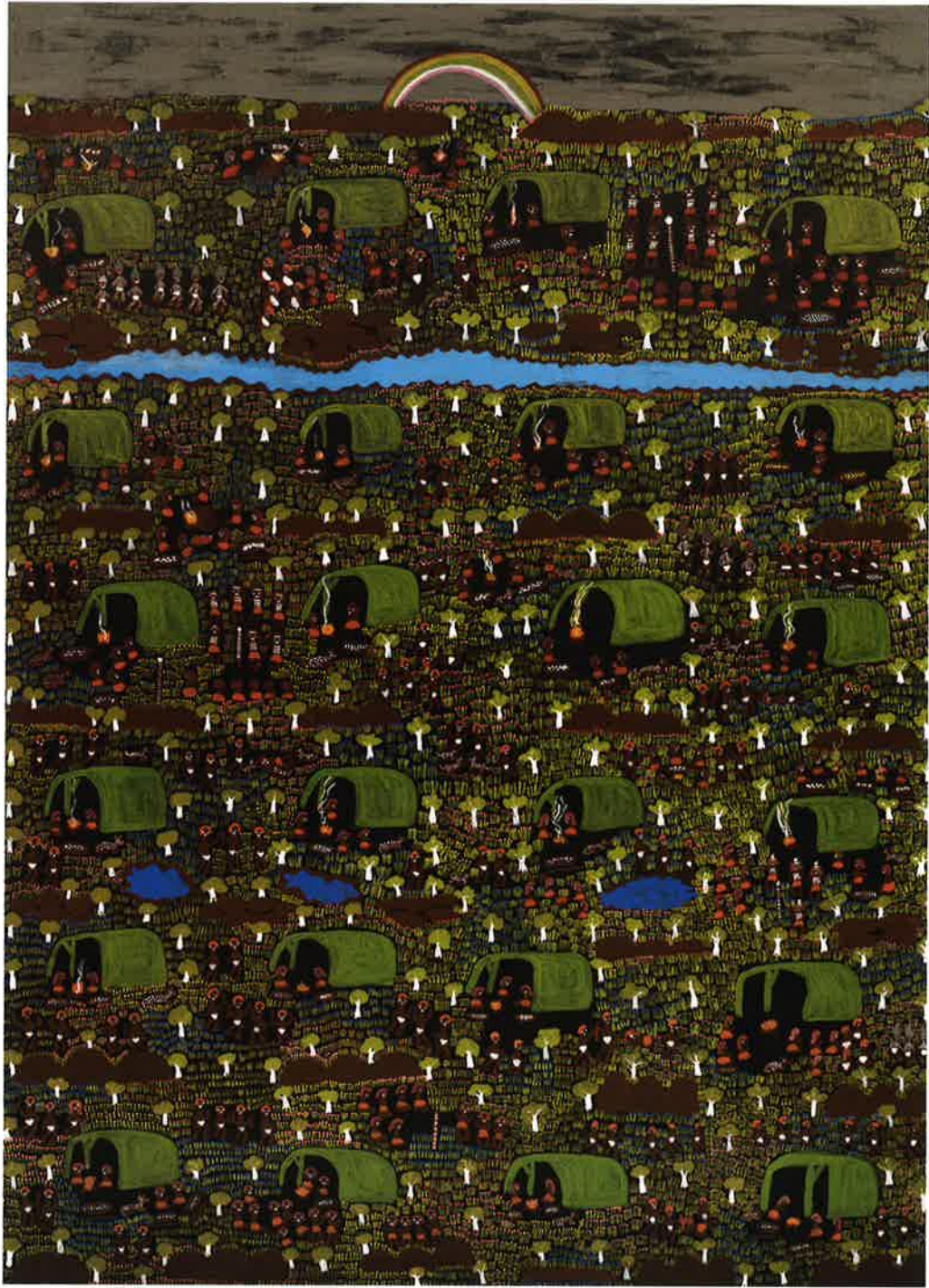
## Foreword

Gavin Wilson  
*Exhibition curator*

One of the nation's most intensely-felt experiences, fire has largely shaped the character of the Australian story. Its impact over time, both literal and metaphorical, on a diverse group of Australian artists reflects our shared experiences with indigenous country, the bush and 'the big smoke'. By tracing their imaginative engagements with the subject, the images on display in *Fireworks* give rise to intriguing notions about the interplay between people and their environment, illuminating the nature of both.

Summer in Australia is known as the bushfire season. The recent series of overwhelming conflagrations across the country have had a profound effect on the national psyche. Yet fire was an integral part of national life well before the arrival of European settlers. Indigenous inhabitants have used fire as a land management tool for tens of thousands of years. Perhaps, it is time to re-examine earlier notions of *reading the land* in the light of recent events that may enhance our perception of the national landscape.

The initial concept for the exhibition was hatched in a conversation in November 2002, with the then director of Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Dr. Margaret Rich, who felt there was a need to examine the impact fire has had in Australian art. Whilst the narrative of the bushfire would remain vital to the concept, I felt it would be productive to trace, over time, fiery manifestations in disparate contexts that continue to inspire and inform the work of Australian artists. *Fireworks*, the touring exhibition, is the result of that investigation.



## Sifting the embers

Gavin Wilson

Audrey Kngwarreye and Lucky Kngwarreye  
Utopia, Alyawarr  
*Untitled (old time landscape)* 1992  
synthetic polymer paint on poly/cotton  
208.5 x 151.0 x 3.2 cm  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
© Reproduced courtesy Utopia Art Sydney

When the explorer Captain James Cook was blown north from Van Diemen's Land on board *Endeavour* in 1770, he would be the first European to navigate the entire east coast of Australia. Peering through his telescope, Cook observed that fire was ever-present – an experience that prompted him to describe the place as 'a continent of smoke'<sup>1</sup>. Cook concluded that 'it was a Certain sign the Country is inhabited'<sup>2</sup>. During his voyage along the coast, he noted that, whether silently smouldering in a multitude of Aboriginal hearths or blazing away as a result of the deliberate burning-off which the indigenous people employed to manage the land, 'we saw smoke by day or fires by night wherever we came.'<sup>3</sup>

American historian Stephen Pyne feels that this 'combination of singularity with universality'<sup>4</sup> is a distinguishing factor in the nature of fire in Australia. In a domestic context, Aboriginal camp fires, as depicted in Audrey and Lucky Kngwarreye's *Untitled (old time landscape)* 1992, linked small family groups with the larger tribal community. There would have been thousands of these vestal fires burning constantly across the country, beyond the range of the explorer's telescope. In time, the ubiquitous billy fire would usurp the Aboriginal camp fire, as European colonisation took hold.

From the evidence in Cook's journals, encounters between Europeans and Aborigines almost always involved a fiery exchange; the latter advancing with a smouldering fire-stick, while the former responded with a volley of musket fire. These first encounters between an ancient and modern culture resulted in a wary relationship, one that was rendered unequal by European technology.

An incident that illustrated the relationship took place at the present site of Cooktown, in far north Queensland, where *Endeavour* had damaged its hull on a coral outcrop and retreated to shore for repairs. While encounters with indigenous groups were reported as generally cordial, the situation literally flared up when it appeared, to the local tribe, that Cook's party had taken up 'permanent' residence on the resource-rich estuarine environment of what is now the Endeavour River. The incident is

described by Pyne: '...taking advantage of tall grass and offshore winds, frustrated Aborigines surrounded their encampment with fire and drove the intruders to their boats in a frenzy. The episode frightened and infuriated the English, who returned fire. It put the Europeans on notice that this land was different from those they had come to know. To cope with Australia, they had to cope with Aboriginal fire. Thus with knowledge, irony, power, terror, and sublimity – with bush fire – began the Australian education of the European.'<sup>5</sup>

While fire would continue to play a dramatic role in the colonial conflict between the indigenous people and European settlers, the majority of Aboriginal fires were lit to obtain food and maintain food supplies. In his book *The Future Eaters* (1994), Tim Flannery cites fellow professor Rhys Jones who delineated the use of fire by Aborigines in his influential article, *Fire-Stick Farming* (1969). Jones's list includes 'amusement, signalling, to clear ground, to facilitate travel or kill vermin, hunting, re-generation of plant food for both humans and kangaroos and expanding human habitat by limiting the extent of southern rainforest (which was largely unusable by aborigines)'.<sup>6</sup>

The application of 'fire-stick farming' over millennia would be the critical factor in the release of nutrients into Australia's woodland and grassland ecosystems. The widespread practice maintained a viable food supply for the Aboriginal population. As well, the fire-loving species of plants, such as banksia and hakea, that evolved in the vast heathlands, relied specifically on fire for the release of seed and pollen. One of the first in the colony to link fire

with sustainability was the Surveyor-General of NSW, Sir Thomas Mitchell. In 1848, he wrote: *Fire, grass and kangaroos, and human inhabitants, seem all dependent on each other for existence in Australia; for any one of these being wanting, the others could no longer continue. Fire is necessary to burn the grass, and form those open forests, in which we find the large forest kangaroo; the native applies that fire to the grass at certain seasons, in order that a young green crop may subsequently spring up, and so attract and enable him to kill or take the kangaroo with nets.*<sup>7</sup> The fire-stick method of farming limited major conflagrations and systematic burning reduced the prevalence of the thickly-timbered country and created the open grassy woodlands much admired by explorers and early settlers.

The colonial domination of the country silenced the indigenous people's age-old dialogue with the land. Soon, much of the bush and many of its inhabitants would conform to a model of European civilization, with consequences that were often culturally and environmentally disastrous. The end of the Aboriginal fire regime contributed to a cycle of devastating wildfires that continue today. Events such as the Black Thursday fires of 1851, that engulfed a quarter of what is now Victoria, would take hold of the public's imagination years after the event. When the British-born painter William Strutt displayed *Black Thursday, February 6th 1851*, 1864, in a regional touring exhibition, visitors were shocked by the tumultuous nature of the terror and mayhem evoked in the painting. By deploying a wide panoramic format, the artist makes it appear as though the whole colony, including the wildlife, is fleeing in chaos before



William Strutt *Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851* 1864  
oil on canvas  
106.5 x 343.0 cm  
Collection: State Library of Victoria



Naylor Gill (*Bushfire, Gippsland c.1910*)  
oil on canvas  
65 x 105 cm  
Private collection, Bathurst

the advancing conflagration. Horrific fire storms such as *Black Thursday* would soon be seared into the national psyche.

The year of what was known as The Great Fires took place in 1898 in South Gippsland, Victoria. The worst day of the fire, February 1st 1898, was known as *Red Tuesday*. The circumstances leading to that fateful day were described by Stephen Pyne: *The Great Fires were, as the pioneers appreciated, intimately interdependent with settlement. Selectors and squatters had rendered the countryside into a medley of cleared, partially cleared, and uncleared lands. There were bush humpies insinuated amid dense gallery forest, shaded by trees reaching more than 150 feet in height; bush farms, surrounded with desiccated ring barked forests, small paddocks, and cultivated fields; mature farms, the product of more than twenty years of relentless clearing, ploughing, sowing, and road making. All were parched by drought, and all burned, but the marginal sites experienced the greatest fury.*<sup>8</sup>

The Gippsland fire was memorialised in the monumental work of John Longstaff, *Gippsland, Sunday night, February 20th, 1898*. Influenced by Longstaff, Naylor Gill painted an interesting work some years later *Bushfire, Gippsland* c.1910, that depicts the horror of a small homestead in the Gippsland forest about to be engulfed by a raging fire. Gill's stark image transfers the inferno from the epic to the intimate.

The holocaust that became the yardstick against which all other fires are measured came to a climax on January 13, 1939. It was known as

Black Friday. As Pyne noted: *'Seventy one lives were lost, sixty nine mills were burnt. Millions of acres of fine forest ...were destroyed or badly damaged. Townships were obliterated in a few minutes. Mills, houses, bridges, tramways, machinery were burned to the ground, men, cattle, horses, sheep were devoured by the fires or asphyxiated by the scorching depilated air.'*<sup>9</sup> Pyne again: *'Everything that characterised Australian fires since European colonisation was there... (the Black Friday fires) signified a systematic breakdown in Australia fire practices and precepts that immediately established itself as the standard for disaster, the worst-case scenario against which every subsequent fire would be measured.'*<sup>10</sup> In the case of the Royal Commission case that followed, all Commonwealth states enacted new bushfire acts and organised bushfire brigades while the southern states overhauled their forestry and rural fire programs. Black Friday was the catalyst for a national strategy on bushfire.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence is mounting that with the demise of the Aboriginal fire regime, the horrific fire storms of the recent past will continue to sweep across south east Australia. In considering ways to combat them, a return to Aboriginal methods of land management has been encouraged not just by scientists but by perceptive artists, who have closely observed the environment in the course of their work. Among them are two artists selected for the *Fireworks* exhibition, John Wolseley and Ken Orchard. Over the past decade, both have witnessed the aftermath of the intense wild fires that decimated the Royal National Park, south of Sydney. It is interesting to trace the direct physical encounter both artists experienced with the

post-conflagration environment. Ken Orchard's *Burnt ridge, National Park*, 1994, is a direct response to the fires that ravaged the national park during the hot summer of 1993/94. While staying in the nearby beach-side suburb of Scarborough, north of Wollongong, Orchard familiarised himself with a particular region in the park.<sup>12</sup> In coming to terms with the charred vegetation, the artist adopted a kind of expressionist approach taking each sheet of paper (fifteen in all) and directly rubbing them against the individual carbonised remains of the varying vegetation on the ridge. The final work has the aura of a reliquary – a haunting reminder of fire's commanding presence in the landscape. The lifeless aura in *Burnt ridge, National Park*, amplifies that oppressive, forlorn moment that precedes regeneration in the ancient fire-cycle.

Eight years later, when the Royal National Park had largely recovered, conditions were once again ripe for an inferno. In the course of the wild fires that devastated areas of coastal New South Wales at Christmas in 2001, The Royal National Park was once again reduced to a charred maze. On this occasion, it was John Wolseley who would venture into the smoky ruins. While artist in residence at Sydney Grammar School, Wolseley spent five months drawing and painting in the park.

Wolseley's journal describes the observations and events that would determine the artist's way forward. In a passage written when he was at Curra Moors overlooking the sea, Wolseley described a breakthrough that would have a major impact on his subsequent practice. *While working on a series of routine drawings of*

*charred banksia, Isopogon, Silky Needle-bush, and Porcupine Grass, the unexpected occurred: ... this afternoon something happened that was completely amazing. The strong wind was shaking my easel so violently I could hardly draw. Then the large piece of paper on its support crashed over on top of the Isopogon. And there – punctuating the surface – were the most rhythmic and lyrical charcoal notations. The little black fingers of the plant – arranged at intervals like some extraordinary drawing instrument holding charcoal sticks, had made staccato dots and marks of a kind I don't think I could intentionally draw myself. So then I clipped some new paper to the board and gently and sometimes firmly moved the board onto and over several burnt bushes. What was so beautiful was that the different charcoal twigs would land on the paper and then as I moved would register their sliding, almost syncopated movement across it.*<sup>13</sup>

After examining the calligraphic imprints and the apparent randomness of the markings, in works such as *Isopogon – frot*, Royal National Park 2002, Wolseley began to perceive a meaning in the works that tells a simple, yet eloquent story of place: *The charcoal fingers punctuate the air in the different branching modes peculiar to each species. And, you could say, the pattern of marks they inscribe expresses the nature of that piece of land – the wind and climate, the low scrub habitat.*<sup>14</sup>

An incident that further sparked Wolseley's curiosity was a sighting of the Embroidered Merops, a rare Regent Honeyeater that had not been seen in the area for 70 years. Amidst the sheets of frottage, Wolseley placed precise





Ken Orchard *Burnt ridge National Park* 1994  
charcoal and tea stains, 15 sheets of stonehenge paper  
231.0 x 285.0 cm (overall)  
Courtesy of the artist

watercolour drawings of the bird, along with a distinct coded representation of its song, known as a sonogram. The exquisitely rendered creature, against a background of 'bush notation' could be interpreted as a joyous symbol of renewal.

Wolseley was unaware of Ken Orchard's earlier encounter with the charred remains of the Royal National Park, and the latter's direct original engagement with the terrain. Whereas Orchard had rendered a vertical or elevated section of carbonised bushland, Wolseley's gestural depiction of the horizontal impact on the vegetation produced, in plan form, a rhythmic view of his own charred site. The combined achievement of these artists has been to produce work that gives rise to a fresh, powerful sense of place wrested from an imaginative collision with topography.

It is interesting to see the varying ways in which artists have responded to events surrounding fire – whether immediate, or retrieved from memory. The 1968 bushfire that blazed through the Dandenong Ranges on the fringe of Melbourne was to have a dramatic impact on artist Fred Williams. A diary entry, cited in a National Gallery of Victoria catalogue,<sup>15</sup> tells the story:

*Fire – Hot – 100*

*After lunch we were resting when (we heard) a circling aero (plane) and Mervyn Bendle and Kath came running down the path (3:10pm) – a huge pall of orange flame and enormous black clouds coming over the hill. Lyn collects all of the children in the street and off ... My tongue swells up, and the bottom roof of my mouth*

*pulls away from the teeth.*<sup>16</sup>

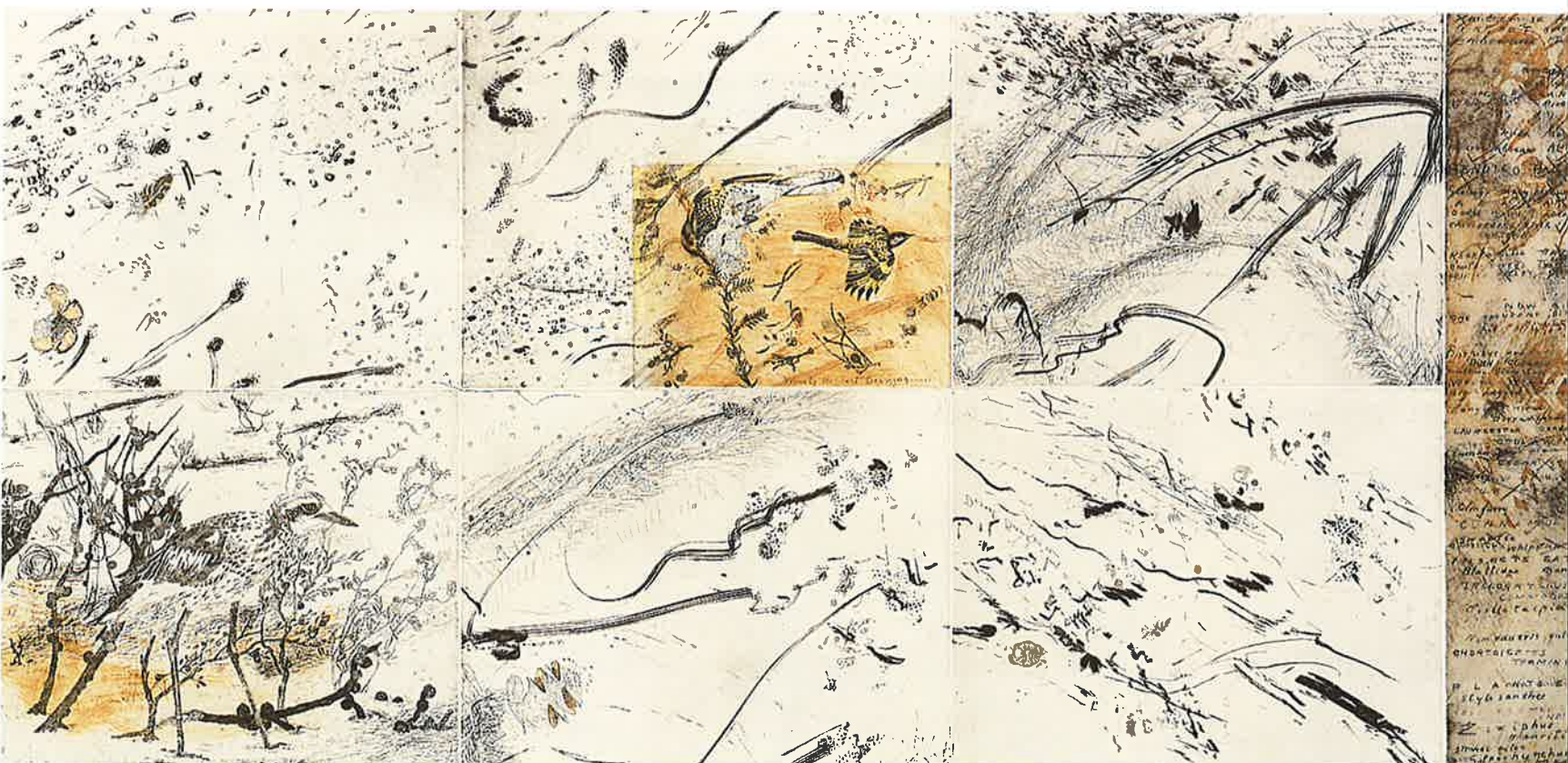
The fires transformed the Upway area that was an important painting ground for the artist. Struck by the extraordinary burnt landscape, Williams documented the scene with scores of gouache studies that were later followed by paintings in the studio, including the evocative *Landscape with burning tree 2*, 1968-69. This fine body of work reflects Williams's response to the passage of the fire from the time of its arrival and resulting destruction, to the eventual renewal of the bushland.

The unchecked progression of a bushfire scorching its way through low-lying scrub and across timbered ridges can leave the stark impression of a ruthless invasion. Both Lorna Nimmo in *The Bushfire's Passage*, 1952 and Cressida Campbell in *Burnt bush*, 1991 have traced the bushfire's impact from a high vantage point engaging the viewer in the particular topography of each site. In Lorna Nimmo's work, painted in the Kurrajong district west of Sydney, we are left to ponder the arc of burnt vegetation that frames a valley of untouched paddocks in the middle distance. The painting is imbued with a delicacy that belies the destructive force of her subject.

To the north of Sydney, the sandstone ridges and heathlands in Cressida Campbell's painted woodblock have been devastated by a vast, all-consuming wildfire. The only untouched element in the charred panorama is a body of water, perhaps a tributary of the Hawkesbury River. It is a key component in both the landscape and the artist's skilfully-constructed composition.



John Wolseley *Isopogon frot* – Royal National Park 2002  
carbonised wood and watercolour on Blue lake 'Brolga' handmade paper  
71.0 x 155.5 cm (sheet)  
Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries



John Wolseley *The slender leaved Mallee Desert Banksia, Scub Casuarina, the Willaroo and the last of the Regent Honeyeaters* 2004  
etching (edition 20)  
60.0 x 131.0 cm (image)  
Courtesy of John Wolseley and Australian Galleries



Fred Williams *Landscape with burning tree II* 1968/69  
oil on canvas  
122.0 x 132.5 cm  
Collection: Estate of Fred Williams, Melbourne



Lorna Nimmo *The bush fire's passage* 1952  
oil on aluminium  
40.7 x 50.8 cm  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
© AGNSW



Cressida Campbell *Burnt bush* 1991  
Colour woodblock (watercolour on plywood)  
60.0 x 90.0 cm  
Private collection, Sydney



Jon Cattapan *From the Shoalhaven fires* 2003  
gouache on 24 sheets of paper  
21.0 x 30.0 cm (each sheet) (detail)  
Courtesy of the artist and Bellas Milani, Kaliman and Sutton Galleries





Jon Cattapan *From the Shoalhaven fires* 2003  
gouache on 24 sheets of paper  
21.0 x 30.0 cm (each sheet) (detail)  
Courtesy of the artist and Bellas Milani, Kaliman and Sutton Galleries

In the case of Jon Cattapan, who was undertaking a summer residency at Bundanon, the spectacular bushfire that raged through the Shoalhaven valley was a savage, awesome event that prompted a direct response. Working in gouache on A4 sheets of paper, Cattapan's luminous studies *From the Shoalhaven fires*, 2003 traced the fire's progress, in a day/night sequence that included an eerie depiction of the smoky eclipse of the sun.

In 2001, the New York-based Australian artist Judy Cotton was undertaking a residency at the Haefliger cottage/studio in Hill End, NSW when she witnessed a bush litter burn-off getting out of control. While the ensuing bushfire was eventually contained, the local drama ignited the final weeks of Cotton's residency with pyrotechnic images of molten landscapes. The series of small gouaches in *23 Fires, Hill End*, 2001, were drawn from the artist's first reaction to the event. It seems the smell of burning eucalyptus and surging flames triggered memories of her childhood in country New South Wales, where bushfires were a regular part of life.

In April 2002, the painter Henry Mulholland visited the south coast of New South Wales after the summer bushfires. He became absorbed in the landscape, witnessing scenes of transformation and renewal. The experience was the inspiration for his exhibition, *Rhythms in a burnt landscape* that featured a series of elemental wood-cut prints, including the exhibited works *Skeletal scrub – black, red*, 2002, and *Burnt scrub, orange and blue ground*, 2002. The following statement from the artist is from his exhibition catalogue.

*I was completely surprised at the amount of colour I encountered and the nature of the bush after fire had passed. I had expected black everywhere but this was not the case. There were bursts of pure colour from the almost instant regrowth – the peeled bark, the bleeding gums, the leaves burnt orange, the scorched clay – and vertical strips of blue sky amidst the black trees. In fact, it is the blackness that isolates the colour – frames it, gives it its potency, AMPLIFIES IT<sup>17</sup>*

The painter and print maker, G.W. Bot lived through the terrible fires that destroyed a vast area of Canberra in 2003. Parts of suburban Canberra were virtually wiped off the map, with the loss of four lives and over five hundred homes. Although scarred and traumatised after watching fires destroy all the land around her property, Bot produced a poetic body of work that formed the nucleus of her major exhibition, *An Island of Life*, 2004. The work on paper selected for *Fireworks* is an elegant diptych ... *Burnt garden*, 2003. It is the distillation of an experience – a quiet meditation on an horrific event that, for the many who suffered such tragic losses, would have been almost too appalling to comprehend.

The same wildfires that decimated Canberra swept across vast tracts of south-east Australia, leaving a trail of destruction that reached into the high country of New South Wales and Victoria. Cooma-based artist Michael Taylor watched a menacing fire approach the region, gaining in momentum and audacity as it consumed the drought-stricken countryside. In *Kiandra, (Summer 2003)* 2003, the artist has imbued the painting with the startling presence



*Judy Cotton Fires, Hill End 2001*  
watercolour and gouache on paper  
80.0 x 100.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



G. W. Bot *Burnt garden* (diptych) 2003  
Linocut  
92,0 x 52,0 cm (each sheet)  
Courtesy of the artist



Henry Mulholland *Burnt scrub, orange and blue ground* 2002  
colour woodcut on lwaki paper; Edition 2/5  
34.0 x 20.0 cm (image)  
Courtesy of the artist and Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney



Henry Mulholland *Skeletal scrub - black/red I* 2002  
colour woodcut on lwaki paper; Edition 2/5  
34.0 x 20.0 cm (image)  
Courtesy of the artist and Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney

and energetic impact of the blaze. Taylor's mastery of gesture and sure handling of pigment leaves an indelible impression.

The tussock grasses and heathlands at the headwaters of the Murrumbidgee and Snowy Rivers did not escape the 2003 fires. Old-timers and National Park Rangers were shocked to witness the bushfire's advance into this rarely-burnt habitat. The build-up of fuel in the Snowy Mountains National Park and the long-running drought extended the fire's scope. Not long after the event, painter and ceramicist Michael Ramsden visited the site. Seeing the extent of the burnt riverine habitat and the eerie transformation of the landscape, Ramsden was prompted to develop a work in stark contrast to his previous verdant studies. The burnt and charred surface of *Burn the river first*, 2004, with its line of a dull, flickering flame, is a subtle testament to fire's all-consuming reach.

When it comes to the memory of an event or incident, John Firth-Smith has the ability to realise his experience with vivid, tautly constructed imagery. *Ember Rim*, 1970, evokes a number of elements associated with the aftermath of fire. The dry quality of the pigment and the overall tone of the work evoke the quiet, melancholic atmosphere often found in the ashen aftermath of a bushfire. The arching line contained within the canvas could be an outline of the sun in a smoke and ash-filled sky. Yet, the work also conjures the arc of a domestic hearth, impregnated with the memory of a thousand fires.

Another painting charged with the memory of fire is Elizabeth Cummings' *Wedderburn after*

*the fire*, 1994. The work is based on the aftermath of a bushfire that blazed through her property south-west of Sydney. The fire threatened her home before destroying a small studio and the surrounding bushland. The square format of Cummings's work depicts a world (her world) reduced to a charred, smoky ruin. The blackened outline of debris, and the washed-out green tones of heat-affected vegetation on an ochre ground marked by the fiery trauma, is an eloquent statement of loss. But it is more than that – the painting is ingrained with a quiet, transformative power – a defiant act of creation amidst the embers of potential despair.

Photographer Ed Douglas witnessed at first hand the Ash Wednesday fires that swept through the Adelaide Hills in February 1983. His account of the aftermath of the event and his subsequent photographs attest to the fire's staggering impact, and the issue of an artist/photographer coming to grips with the reality of being confronted by a scene of loss and total destruction: ...*When it was safe, I drove a few kilometres from Adelaide to the Eagle On The Hill hotel to find an awe-inspiring level of apocalyptic destruction with which to work. Powers beyond my imagination had been at work here. No birds broke the silence and I became unnerved by the overwhelming stillness. I felt deeply alone until I knelt to look at something on the ground and noticed that a nest of ants were already creating trails in the ash.*

*After working for a while I began to question my right to intrude into this landscape which had been created at such a cost. The energy*



Michael Taylor *Kiandra (Summer '03)* 2003  
oil on canvas  
152.5 x 122.0 cm  
Collection of James Mollison AO



Michael Ramsden *Burn the river first* 2004  
oil, acrylic, shellac and marble dust on plywood panel  
100 x 190 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney





John Firth-Smith *Ember Rim* 1970  
acrylic on cotton  
183.0 x 244.0 cm  
Private collection, Sydney



Ed Douglas *Ash Wednesday, near Eagle On The Hill, South Australia I* 1983  
type C photograph  
22.8 x 45.2 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Ed Douglas *Ash Wednesday, near Eagle On The Hill, South Australia II* 1983  
type C photograph  
23.5 x 48.1 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

*unleashed here demanded respect. I stepped softly and took only a few photographs.*<sup>18</sup>

The 'big smoke' is the colloquial expression used to define urban Australia. It was the great smoking chimney stacks of industry in Sydney and Melbourne that attracted the moniker. In the days when most Australians lived in the bush, a trip or re-location to a major city could be a hazardous enterprise. The incidence of fires destroying or damaging urban dwellings and industrial sites saw the fire brigade and its firemen assume the status of community heroes. The elegiac tone of Arthur Streeton's *The Fireman's Funeral, George Street, 1894*, is a defining image that celebrates communal mourning and the selfless courage of a fire fighter. In the essay that follows this, Alan Krell develops the theme, citing imagery and events that characterise fire's impact on society.

For the urban artists of today, the unpredictable events that occur around them can, at times, develop into subjects for investigation. A certain degree of intrigue often surrounds a destructive urban fire. Questions are asked, and not always answered. Was it the result of faulty electrical wiring, a dropped cigarette, a heater too close to a flammable object – or just old-fashioned arson?

In 1986, Garry Shead painted a memorable portrait of fellow artist Martin Sharp, which was entered into the Archibald Prize for portraiture. The prize that year was awarded to Davida Allen's portrait of Dr John Arthur McKelvey Shera.

Shead's painting can be viewed as a dual portrait: on one hand, there is the artist's insightful study of his friend and colleague, with

whom he had worked as a satirical cartoonist for the infamous OZ magazine in the early 1960s. The figure of Sharp, displaying his humorous, idiosyncratic disposition along with his love of popular culture, dominates the foreground of the work. Yet, the background reveals the portrait of a city, instilling the painting with an air of poignancy. The conflagration to the left of Sharp is the mysterious Ghost Train fire at Luna Park in 1979 that saw the death of seven people. For many Sydneysiders, this tragic incident marked the city's loss of innocence. Sharp, along with his fellow artists and friends, attempted to revive the unique spirit of the place, but it was to no avail. The horrific fire signalled the end of the Luna Park known to generations of Sydney-siders as a beloved repository of popular culture since the 1930s. Today, Shead's portrait of Martin Sharp resides at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra.

The Sydney-based 'artist, satirist and activist' Peter Kingston has had a long association with both Garry Shead and Martin Sharp that goes back to Kingston's stint at OZ magazine in 1963. Luna Park has also been an abiding passion of Kingston's, along with the fate of Sydney Harbour as it undergoes a transformation from a working port to a playground. In *So... do you think I did it?* 2004, a work that could be straight out of the pages of the old OZ magazine, Kingston re-visits an intriguing incident that appears to be dominated by another mysterious fire. The expressive etching of the model Caroline Byrne plunging to her death from the Gap at Watsons Bay has all the elements of a 'who done it', with a smoking industrial blaze in the background



Elisabeth Cummings *After the fires, Wedderburn* 1994  
oil on canvas  
181.0 x 181.0 cm  
Collection: King Street Gallery on Burton, Sydney

apparently referring to one that reaped millions in an insurance windfall. Did she know too much? Was it murder or suicide? Only the figure of her former boyfriend, Gordon Wood, seen standing by the safety rail, seems to know the answers.

With the industrial complex dominating urban and rural life, naked flames have begun to disappear from homes and industry: so too, with agriculture. With mechanical harvesting minimising the tough manual work of the canecutter, the image of the annual firing of the sugar cane crop – an emblematic event that stretched south from Mossman on the east coast of far north Queensland to the Clarence River valley in northern New South Wales – is also fading. A thorough torching of the cane field before harvest would rid the crop of the excess leaves or ‘trash’ that surrounded the cane. It also drove out snakes, rats, and other pests.

A good deal of planning and preparation would ensure that the fiery spectacle and its aftermath, as depicted in Jörg Schmeisser’s hand-coloured etching, *Cane fire near Bundaberg* 1989, and Claudine Marzik’s *After fire II* 2004, as well as the photographs of Brian Rogers, would be successful. As Stephen Pyne put it, *‘Burning became an informing principle. Growers selected cane varieties in part for their combustibility. Drought-hardy and frost-resistant varieties tend to clutter their stalks with leafy trash, making fire both possible and mandatory. Growers took advantage of regular sea breezes and topographic winds and orientated their fields so they could be burned accordingly. The burns established the rhythms of the harvest: each night the grower burned the patches that*

*were to be harvested the following day.’*<sup>19</sup>

One of Australia’s best-known and most popular plays, Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, was inspired by the migratory life of fictional cane cutters, Barney and Roo. After burning and slashing their way through the Queensland cane fields during the winter months, the two cashed-up mates would make the annual trip to Sydney for the layoff. Here, with their long-standing girlfriends, they enjoyed romantic summers that always included a trip to Luna Park to secure a kewpie doll to add to their girls’ collection. The romantic spell was broken when the ageing Roo, after 17 years, decided to quit the annual trek north and attempt a settled life in Sydney. Tragically, he loses both his girlfriend and his mate in the traumatic transition. There would be no place in the big smoke for an ageing ex-cane cutter. By casting off the cane cutter’s potent, mythic aura, Roo became a diminished figure. The fire that shaped his life and work had gone out.

In a fitting bicentennial tribute to the vital role fire has played in the Australian story, a ring of bonfires was ignited around the continent to mark the occasion. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, 1988 – two hundred years after the beginnings of European settlement – the first of the bonfires was lit by the Governor General at Botany Bay. Throughout the night, a procession of beacons was ignited that encircled the island-continent. The potent symbolism of the event prompted historian Geoffrey Blainey to reflect upon the vestal pyres as a way to ‘celebrate the unity of Australia. It would also honour that most powerful, majestic and frightening force in our history – the force of fire.’<sup>20</sup>



Garry Shead *Martin Sharp* 1986  
oil and collage on canvas  
198.0 x 122.0 cm (image); 206.5 x 130.5 cm (frame)  
Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra



Peter Kingston *So you think I did it?* 2004  
etching with watercolour  
40.0 x 30.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries





Jörg Schmeisser *Canefield near Bundaberg, Queensland 1989*  
etching on 3 sheets of paper  
61.0 x 147.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries



Claudine Marzik *After fire II* 2004  
acrylic on canvas  
110.0 x 130.0 cm  
Collection of the artist

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Brian Rogers *Crescendo I* 2003  
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69.0 x 89.0 cm  
Collection: Australian Sugar Industry Museum



Eugène von Guérard *Bushfire between Mount Elephant and Timboon, 1857 1859*  
oil on canvas mounted on board  
34.8 x 56.3 cm  
Collection: Ballarat Fine Art Gallery

## In its element

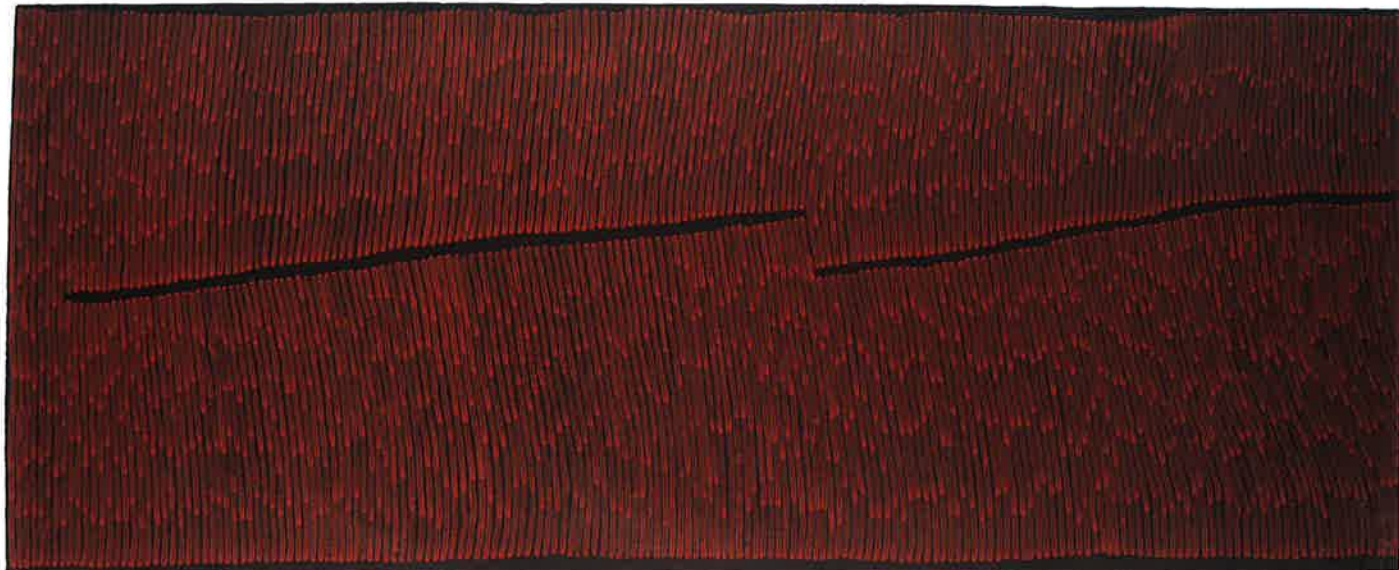
Alan Krell

### Fire in Australia

Fire is part of the very stuff of daily lives, of our dreams and our misfortunes. The regularity of the 'bushfire season', year in, year out, has inured many of us to fire's devastating effects – yet recent, violent conflagrations on the outskirts of our capitals have brought fire literally into our backyards. Fire is no longer *there*: it is *here*.

For Australia's original inhabitants, it was ever thus: both a fact of life and a totem in their preternatural 'dreamings'. By contrast, for the Austrian-born Eugène von Guérard, fire was something sublime. This notion of a transcendental nature *in extremis* is powerfully evoked in *Bushfire between Mount Elephant and Timboon* 1859. A moonlit night sets the dramatic backdrop for this fire which sweeps inexorably from left to right across the length of the horizon (and canvas), sending columns of smoke into the sky, and separating heaven and earth in one neat line. While devastation is implied – of humans, animals and nature – what we are left with is the opposite: an awe inspiring, fiery magnificence, in which the heavily foliated trees silhouetted at the extreme left stand defiant.

A similar effect is achieved in the cibachrome print by Shane Fitzgerald, *Inferno, Arnhem Land*, 2002, where what seems like molten lava stretches across the length of the image's rectangular format. Unlike the von Guérard, this hot-to-touch stream of fire is located at the bottom reaches of the picture, while the remainder of the photograph is diffused with wispy veils of smoky reds and blacks. In its less-than-defined imagery, this work shifts the sublime into a more indeterminate region. Its final impact, though, is one of wonderment. Not so, I think, with Ronnie Tjampitjinpa's large canvas, *Bushfire* 2002, which invites comparison with both the von Guérard and the Fitzgerald. All three negotiate the horizontal of the canvas, but in Tjampitjinpa's austere picture the three finger-like lines of red, the middle one extending to the end of the frame, suggest the dreadful symmetry of fire.



Ronnie Tjampitjinpa *Bushfire* 2003  
acrylic on linen  
122.0 x 300.0 cm  
Private collection, courtesy of Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane



Shane Fitzgerald *Inferno, Arnhem land* 2002  
duralux print  
127.0 x 187.0 cm  
Private collection, Rockhampton

There is certainly nothing 'sublime' about the fires that caught Sydney by surprise on October 8, 2002. Beneath a huge aerial photograph of burning houses on the front page of the following day's *Sydney Morning Herald*, staff reporters wrote:

Ten homes in Engadine went up in flames, but there were also blazes in Llandilo, Richmond and Windsor-Castlereagh... A major blaze was also burning near Bilpin on Bells Line of Road in the Blue Mountains National Park last night, while Rural Fire Service volunteers were fighting two fires that had cut the Newell Highway near Narrabri... In all, 10 houses had been destroyed in Engadine last night<sup>1</sup>

These matter-of-fact words belie the dramatic headline, 'The monster arrives early'; a hugely evocative phrase that introduces an imaginative dimension (as always) into the discourse on fire.

The firefighter as hero is a recurring theme in paintings and graphic works from the nineteenth-century to the present. Rescuing maidens in distress, saving babies and their mothers, he is saviour incarnate. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the painting by the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais, *The rescue* 1855, in the National Gallery of Victoria. His first painting of a contemporary subject, it shows a sturdy firefighter emerging from a burning building with two children: one is caught between his arms, the other clutches his back; a kneeling mother in a nightdress stretches out her arms, with theatrical poignancy, in a welcoming gesture.

John Everett Millais  
*The rescue* 1855  
oil on canvas  
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria

Some five decades later, Fairlie Cuninghame would make a plaster bust of *Frederick Baker, A Sydney Fireman* 1908. Frederick was the brother of the 1908 Olympic boxer Reg 'Snowy' Baker, and his bust was completed in the City Fire Station in Castlereagh Street for exhibition at the National Art Gallery of New South Wales (the appellation 'National' has since been discarded). Now lost, but known to us from a reproduction in *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 10 March 1908, Cuninghame's sculpture is sober and straightforward.<sup>2</sup>

For the most part, Australian artists have not addressed the firefighter's role in society, real and/or imagined. There are exceptions, and three of these are included in the current exhibition: Arthur Streeton's *Fireman's Funeral*,







Arthur Streeton *Fireman's funeral, George Street 1894*  
oil on canvas  
45.3 x 38.2 cm  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales



Jon Cattapan *Church alight, East Melbourne* 1988  
oil on canvas  
183.0 x 289.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Bellas Milani, Kaliman and Sutton Galleries



Sidney Nolan *Fire, Palais de Danse, St Kilda* 1945  
ripolin on hardboard  
91.5 x 122.0 cm  
Private collection, Sydney

*George Street* 1894; Sidney Nolan's *Fire, Palais de Danse, St. Kilda* 1945; and Jon Cattapan's large, multi-panelled painting, *Church Alight (East Melbourne)* 1988. In all three, the artists respond to contemporary events in various imaginative ways. The subject of the Streeton was the death of senior firefighter, Edward Charles Brown, recently promoted to chief of the new Newtown Fire Station. Streeton shows the huge funeral procession turning left from Park Street into George Street and moving past the Sydney Town Hall towards the Mortuary station, off what is now Railway Square.<sup>3</sup> Streeton's gaze falls on the atmosphere of a rainy day, the towering presence of the Town Hall, and the density of the anonymous group of mourners: 'Never before had such a number of people witnessed the funeral of a fireman', noted *The Sydney Morning Herald*.<sup>4</sup> There's no individualisation in Streeton's painting, and certainly no heroics. Millais's *The rescue*, discussed above, translates the firefighter into a fabled figure. Streeton, by contrast, turns him into 'a man of the crowd'; lost in a Whistlerian veil. Nolan, on the other hand, is at pains to delineate the firefighters and the onlookers; the latter, gob-smacked, all look in our direction – for that matter so do the firefighters, all red and yellow in their smart outfits. Yet for all the attention to detail, the figures (numbering approximately forty) register as an undifferentiated mass. In the end, it is neither the fire nor the skeletal remains of the burnt building that remain in the memory, but rather the sinister, greyish-black smoke that spreads its 'wings' across the bright, blue sky. Meanwhile, Cattapan's *Church Alight (East Melbourne)* is a strange, multi-perspectival, nocturnal scene that fills one's vision with incongruous elements. On

the left, there is the gutted, burning church set amidst a city-scape of buildings with dots of light illuminating windows. To the right, small, toy-like firefighters endeavour to douse the flames; a couple face off in an apparent argument; and a flautist perches above an enigmatic structure onto which miniature figures climb. This vignette is caught, in parenthesis as it were, between sinuous lines that create the profile of a face (is it the performer's?).

Unlike photojournalists and television news reporters, Australian artists have overlooked, for the most part, any obvious reference to people: to the flesh and blood of the fire experience. There are, of course, important exceptions, and two are shown in this exhibition. These are the hugely contrasting works of Uni Nampitjinpa Martin and Dolly Nampitjinpa Daniels, and of Euan Macleod.

Senior law women who have been working for the Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation since its foundation in 1985, Uni Nampitjinpa's and Dolly Nampitjinpa's collaborative canvas, *Warlukurlangu Jukurpa (fire country Dreaming)* 1988, tells the story of the great fire brought about by Lungkarda, the tongue lizard man, to punish his two sons for killing a sacred kangaroo in the Dreaming. In the aftermath of the conflagration, a mighty storm was unleashed which caused all plant and animal life to flourish. The use of fire (in this case also water) as a punitive measure is ubiquitous in many belief systems. In the instance cited above, fire, by default, serves both a destructive and redemptive role; it does this too in the well-known myth of the Phoenix, the marvellous Egyptian bird who is said to live



Dolly Nampitjinpa Daniels and Uni Nampitjinpa Martin  
*Warlukurlangu Jukurpa (fire country Dreaming)* 1988  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
182.4 x 121.8 cm  
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria

for 500 years and to become young again after death by fire. There is a similar configuration of cause and effect in the biblical story (from *Daniel*) of the three young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, who refused to worship before the gold statue of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. As a consequence, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that they be bound with ropes and thrown into a blazing furnace. (The celebrated English artist, JMW Turner, exhibited a painting on this subject in the Royal Academy, London, in 1832). Those who opened the furnace to cast in the recalcitrants were killed by the intense heat, while the latter miraculously survived. Overwhelmed, Nebuchadnezzar now heaped praise on the men of God; thereafter, they lived a prosperous life in Babylon at the King's pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

Euan Macleod deals with death by fire in explicit but hugely suggestive ways. His *Exquisite Corpse* 2000/01 shows the inverted figure of a man whose outstretched hands recall Christ on the Cross. This is an intensely visceral work; the figure's torso, the 'heart' of the picture, consists of red-hot paint thickly applied. Here pigment represents itself but also its 'other' – fire. Hovering above the figure is a pool of water; disk-like, it swirls above (but surely it should be below?) the figure. This painting and a study, the latter shown recently in the small exhibition, 'Fire Dreaming', curated by Sioux Garside at the University Art Gallery, Sydney,<sup>6</sup> beg to be turned on their heads. I suspect it is precisely this topsy-turvy aspect that intrigues Macleod. His burnt and burning men turn everything on its head. Their collective title, *Exquisite Corpse*, is a nod to the Surrealists' fascination with chance, and specifically to the game of the same name

that they popularised<sup>7</sup>. It is also a recognition of their interest in the 'primitive' in myth, and in the unconscious. Garside sees allusions in Macleod's pictures of fire figures, caves and campfires, to a 'subconscious dreaming or to the mythic time of Prometheus and Orpheus.'<sup>8</sup> To this might be added the celebrated tale of Icarus who, together with his father, Daedalus, escaped from the Labyrinth by attaching wings to their shoulders with wax and flying away. Icarus flew too close to the sun, however, which melted the wax and he fell into the sea and drowned. There's something about Macleod's painting, with its sky and water and flames, and its overriding sense of vertigo – a moving up and down and everywhere – that brings strongly to mind Icarus and his fatal, dizzying escapade.

In Macleod's four small canvases, executed like many of his works at Napoleon Reef near Bathurst in the central west of New South Wales, there is a shift to what might be described as fire in its more benevolent mode. Yet these images, with their solitary male figure (in one he is simply a shadowy presence) and with Macleod's characteristic impasto, have the effect of introducing the threatening into the (apparently) everyday.

'The fireside' is a gentle, comforting phrase that alerts us to what I would call fire's mesmerising qualities: its ability to constantly reinvent itself; to have form but to be formless. Fire is not only seen and felt, (its enveloping warmth is a fundamental necessity of life), it also engages the senses of smell and hearing. This is the fire of the campsite, the candle, and the hearth. I'm thinking, for example, of Wendy Sharpe's quietly reflective work, *Hill End* 1994, painted during a



Euan Macleod *Exquisite corpse with fire* 2000/01  
oil on canvas  
180.0 x 137.0 cm  
Private collection, Sydney



Euan Macleod *Fire Figure I* 2001  
oil on canvas  
51.0 x 38.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Euan Macleod *MC fire (sky)* 2002  
oil on canvas  
51.0 x 38.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist





Wendy Sharpe *Hill End* 1994  
oil on canvas  
48.5 x 60.0 cm  
Private collection, Sydney

residency at the Haefliger cottage in Hill End, New South Wales. It is not the fire of the vast, impersonal bush or the constructions of urban settlement. It is her personal fire.

There's a memorable photograph by Darren Pateman, a Fairfax staff member, taken at Cessnock in the Hunter Valley during the bushfires that swept through the area in October 2002. The work, in fact, went on to win for Pateman the Nikon-Walkley prize for suburban and regional photography in 2003. Playing on the conceit of its title, *The Ashes*, Pateman shows white-flannelled cricketers continuing their match as huge fires rage beyond the boundary fence.<sup>9</sup> Bravado? Recklessness? A larrikin gesture? Perhaps all of the above. I mention this photograph, however, because it has the effect of transforming fire into nothing more than a blazing backdrop. In contrast, for many of the artists in this exhibition, fire is something that literally dominates the foreground, covering the canvas in shards of light and form, and movements of colour.

Weaver Hawkins's *Bushfire* 1960, and Tim Storrier's *The ladder* 1993, serve as good examples. Recalling English Vorticist work from the 1920s, Hawkins's painting shows angular, scorched trees set amongst red and yellow flames which swirl throughout the picture. It's a claustrophobic space. So too is Storrier's, in which the skeletal structure of the ladder, perhaps of a firefighter, fallen at a diagonal to its left, is absorbed into a pyre-like blaze. In both pictures the conflagration fills our vision, as it does in David Bowers's *Park Street Burning* 2003, where small, indeterminate dark shapes, reminiscent of Hawkins's geometric trees, fly

through the fiery air while other equally ambiguous forms (buildings? telephone poles? branches?) establish the structure of the painting. A very different mood is evoked by the oil on panel, *Burnt bush, Kur-in-gai* 1994, by Tom Carment. Again, it is a shallow space that has been negotiated; and again, the imagery stretches upwards and sideways and beyond the borders of the painting, but now it is the aftermath of a fire that is the subject, with burnt trees standing out against a blue sky and an explosion of green in the spidery plant suggesting renewal.

There is no hint of recovery in Wes Stacey's two colour photographs *Fleshy tree in smouldering forest* 1981 and *Smouldering Swamp* 1981, and Rick Amor's (*Untitled-bushfire*) 2003. Stacey's deep picture-space draws the viewer into an eerie world of scorched trees and trunks where menace manoeuvres just below the surface. This is a devastated nature, one redolent of a post-apocalypse. And yet, for all the sense of foreboding, these images have an elegiac quality. In contrast, Amor's work comes across as a matter-of-fact visualisation of a nature charred and emptied of life. The same may be said of Ken Orchard's large, 15-paneled charcoal drawing, *Burnt ridge, National Park* 1994. Of course fire turns wood into the blackish residue consisting of impure carbon that we know commonly as charcoal. But rather than using it in conventional ways, Orchard, working in situ, has rubbed his paper panels over the remnants of trees, making his marks with the raw, unharvested charcoal. Through this work in particular, art testifies in a small but significant way to fire's transformative qualities – for better... or for worse.



Darren Pateman *The Ashes* 2002  
colour digital print  
Courtesy of the artist and John Fairfax Holdings



Weaver Hawkins *Bushfire* 1960  
oil on masonite  
76.0 x 101.5 cm  
Private collection, courtesy of Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney



Tim Storrier *The ladder* 1993  
acrylic on canvas  
243.8 x 304.8 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Tom Carment *Burnt bush, McCarr's Creek II* 2004  
oil on paper  
50.0 x 75.0 cm (image); 95.0 x 110.0 cm (frame)  
Courtesy of the artist



Rick Amor *Untitled (bushfire)* 2003  
charcoal on paper  
50.0 x 100.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne



Wesley Stacey *Smouldering swamp* 1981  
type C photograph  
35.4 x 55.5 cm (image)  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Lady (Warwick) Fairfax Acquisition Fund 1985  
© Lesley Stacey





Wesley Stacey *Fleshy tree in smouldering forest* 1981  
type C photograph  
36.7 x 55.4 cm (image)  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Lady (Warwick) Fairfax Acquisition Fund 1985  
© Lesley Stacey



David Bowers *Parkes Street burning* 2003  
oil on board  
93.0 x 123.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney



Tom Carment *Burnt bush, Ku-rin-gai* 1994  
oil on wood panel  
18.0 x 15.5 cm (image); 44.0 x 39.0 cm  
Private collection, Sydney

## Fire in the imagination

The resonant tale of Prometheus has implications for all understandings of the 'poetics of fire'.<sup>10</sup> Prometheus's marvellous acts are twofold: he creates the first man from clay and water; and then, to make his life more tolerable, Prometheus steals fire for him from heaven.

Yet of all the four elements, fire is the most ambivalent. Says Gaston Bachelard: 'It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse... It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation.'<sup>11</sup>

These words cut to the quick. Janus-like in its effects, fire shifts effortlessly from destruction to rebirth, from the intimate to the invasive. Think of the Great Fire of London that raged for four days in September 1666 and destroyed over 13,000 houses, 87 churches and 44 of the City of London's livery halls.<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, very few citizens were killed: six, according to most accounts. What followed was a swift rebuilding programme, completed largely within five years, which hinted at a new London. 'Hinted', because innovative designs were rejected and much of the city's medieval, maze-like structure was retained. Still, like the Phoenix, a re-fashioned London began to emerge, literally from its own ashes.

Two centuries later, Chicago was very much a 'boom town' when it was ravaged by fire in the autumn of 1871: a fire that left 1700 acres of property destroyed and 300 deaths.<sup>13</sup> Within three years, however, the city would arise,

emboldened in its claim to be the modern city *par excellence*: there were now steel-framed skyscrapers, 'prairie houses' – and jazz.

We live with fire. Some might go along with the sentiments of the English writer and volunteer firefighter, William Sansom, who, at the height of the London Blitz, observed that 'Fire is so familiar... its vocabulary – fire, flame, burning, blaze, etc. – has lost its dramatic significance'.<sup>14</sup>

This view would be challenged, however in the vastly different circumstances of al-Qaeda's choreographed destruction of the World Trade Centre. In the aftermath of this horrifying act that resulted in Boschian images of fiery hell, the role of the New York firefighters achieved larger-than-life proportions. Approximately 250 of them lost their lives in a vain but glorious effort to combat a Dante-esque disaster the dimensions of which were beyond even New York's world-weary comprehension.

Rhetoric, myth and reality co-mingle in the experience – and the remembering – of these and other fabled infernos. The GREAT FIRE is always greater than itself. Writing one year after the Chicago Fire, Elias Colbert and Everett Chamberlain (amongst many others) described it:

*'As a spectacle, it was beyond doubt the grandest as well as the most appalling ever offered to mortal eyes... Added to the spectacular elements of the conflagration – the intense and lurid light, the sea of red and black, and the spires and pyramids of flame shooting into the heavens – was its constant and terrible roar, drowning even the voices of the shrieking multitude.'*<sup>15</sup>



Rodney Pople (*Untitled*) 2004  
oil on plywood  
91.5 x 61.0 cm  
Collection of the artist

Elsewhere, Colbert and Chamberlain quote a 'local writer', saying:

*'The people were mad....They stumbled over broken furniture and fell, and were trampled under foot... Liquor flowed like water, for the saloons were broken open and despoiled, and men on all sides were to be seen frenzied with drink... Women, hollow-eyed and brazen-faced, with foul drapery tied over their heads, their dresses half torn from their skinny bosoms, and their feet thrust into trodden-down slippers, moved here and there, stealing, scolding shrilly, and laughing with one another at some particularly 'splendid' gush of flame or 'beautiful' falling-in of a roof...'*<sup>16</sup>

In such stirring accounts, aesthetics and civilian disorder come together in a fiendish, apocalyptic nightmare. Yet one is left with the overwhelming sense that it is the spectacle of the fire – its ability to 'thrill' and to 'inspire' – that is at the heart of these reports. Hence the metaphor of the artist is invoked some pages later, where we read that 'Fire was a strong painter and dealt in weird effects, using only black and red, and laying them boldly on.'<sup>17</sup>

Fire would soon make a pioneering appearance in another form of reportage: Thomas Edison's ground-breaking documentary-drama, *'Life of An American Fireman'* (1903. B & W. Silent. Dir. Edwin S. Porter).<sup>18</sup> Staged with the help of New Jersey's Newark and Orange fire departments, this melodramatic footage focuses on the rescue of a woman and baby from a burning tenement. Firefighters break down doors and windows, a woman screams, a child is carried down a ladder. People run hither and thither.

It is in the genre of the populist film that the mythologising of the firefighter finds its most appropriate expression. The archetype is *Backdraft* (Dir. Ron Howard. 1991) which was produced with the full cooperation and technical support of the Chicago Fire Department. The film was glowingly described by Stanley Span, Coordinator of Special events for the Chicago Fire Department, in a letter he penned to all Chicago firefighters: 'What the "Right Stuff" did for astronauts and "Top Gun" did for pilots, "Backdraft" is going to do for firefighters... it is a privilege to have helped in the making of "Backdraft": the first major motion picture to pay tribute to firefighters – America's unsung heroes.'<sup>19</sup>

Characterised by male-bonding, braggadocio, and (not without irony) frequent shots of cigarette-smoking, *Backdraft* is perhaps more notable for its particular take on the element of fire itself. Throughout the film, fire is treated as an alien but living being, often female: 'Let's hit this bitch head on...', 'Come on, you sneaking son-of-a-bitch', 'She's hot and smoky...'. In one of the more memorable lines, fire is described as 'a living thing, it breathes, it eats... the only way to beat it is to love it a little'.

More recently, *Ladder 49* (Dir. Jay Russell. 2004) has emerged, with a certain inevitability, from the proliferation of images and texts that have celebrated the firefighter post-September 11. I saw this film on the first day it was screened in Manhattan (1 October, 2004). Reminiscent of *Backdraft* in many respects, the marketing surrounding *Ladder 49's* release was typically hyperbolic: 'A gripping and very human story about America's heroes' (Tony Toscano, *Talking*



Arthur Wicks tending beacon fire  
Tagus river, Almada, Portugal  
August 1983  
Photography by Mineo Aayamaguchi

*Pictures*); 'The most accurate glimpse ever inside the lives of firefighters' (David J. Iannone, *Firehouse.Com*).<sup>20</sup>

A sobering rejoinder to such hype was Manohla Dargis's review in *The New York Times*, where she describes it (rightly, I believe) as 'essentially a male weepie about strong, simple men and the strong, simple women behind them, and as such it's platitudinous rubbish. What makes this nonsense more galling than usual is that while *Ladder 49* might have started out as a heartfelt attempt to honour those in the line of literal fire, it weighs in as an attempt to exploit their post-Sept. 11 symbolism.'<sup>21</sup>

Australia has no equivalent of *Backdraft* or a *Ladder 49*, but we did have the TV series, *Fire*, which screened in 1996 with a total of twenty-six episodes. Billed, boldly, as 'A stunning one hour drama series about the last, real action heroes – firefighters', it was produced with the wholehearted support of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Services.<sup>22</sup> This initial support would, however, soon be withdrawn when it became clear that 'actions by the characters violated HMR and Queensland Fire Service policies.'<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, *Fire*'s co-producer, Tony Cavanaugh, viewed the show as 'a great reflection, warts and all, of life in the service'.

The imagination of the ancients was inspired by the myth of Prometheus, and its allure is undimmed. As Bachelard puts it, Prometheus is both 'the giver of fire' and 'the breather of clay into life'.<sup>24</sup> 'What, if any, is the connection between these two, he asks?' The answer is beguiling simple – and powerfully suggestive: 'To appreciate the essential unity of these two

*figures would require only that one have experienced firsthand the kindling of a fire in the forest, the spread of life to tinder at a gentle breath. If blowing gently on a fire's first sparks sparks one's dreams, imagine blowing upon glowing embers rediscovered the next day beneath ashes!'<sup>25</sup>*

These observations return us from the world of television news, disaster movies – as well as the evocations of art – to the wondrous, small events of the everyday, where the simple act of blowing onto embers to light a fire is capable of igniting such rich musings.





## Notes

- 1 Staff Reporters, 'The monster arrives early,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 October, 2002, p. 1
- 2 I am indebted to Eric Riddler for bringing this work to my attention
- 3 Again, thanks to Eric Riddler for this information which is based on detailed coverage of the funeral in *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 September, 1894, p. 5.
- 4 Anon., 'Funeral of Fireman Brown', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September, 1894, p. 5.
- 5 See 'The Story of The Men in the Furnace': <<http://www.virtualchurch.org/fire.htm>> (accessed 20/10/04, 9.20am)
- 6 Garside, Sioux, *Fire Dreaming*, exh. cat., University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney (Sydney, 2004), n.p.
- 7 'a method by which a collection of words or images are collectively assembled, the result being known as the exquisite corpse or *cadavre exquis* in French ...based on an old parlour game called consequences in which players write in turn on a sheet of paper, fold it to conceal part of the writing, and then pass it to the next player for a further contribution.' (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)
- 8 Garside, Sioux, *Fire Dreaming*
- 9 The Sun-Herald, 19 October, 2003, p. 28
- 10 Bachelard, Gaston, *Fragments of A Poetics Of Fire* (1988), trans. Kenneth Haltman, ed., Suzanne Bachelard (Dallas, 1990)
- 11 Bachelard, Gaston, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938), trans. Alan C.M. Ross, (Boston, 1968) p. 7
- 12 See Stephen Porter, *The Great Fire of London* (Gloucestershire, 1998). Also, Adrian Tinniswood, *By Permission of Heaven: The Story of The Great Fire of London* (London, 2003)
- 13 See Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago and London, 1995). Also, David Lowe, ed., *The Great Chicago Fire: In Eyewitness Accounts and 70 Contemporary Photographs and Illustrations* (New York, 1979)
- 14 Sansom, William, 'The Naked Flame', in *Fire and Water: The London Firefighters' Blitz 1940-42 Remembered*, H.S. Ingham, ed., (Great Britain, 1992 [1942]), p. 210
- 15 Colbert, Elias, and Chamberlain, Everett. *Chicago and the Great Conflagration* (Cincinnati and New York, 1872), p. 212
- 16 *ibid.*, pp. 216-17
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 218
- 18 The copy of the film I consulted is held in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. My thanks to Charles Wheeler, Curator of Film Archives
- 19 Typed letter by Stanley Span, 26 February, 1991, in the archives of the Los Angeles Fire Department. I am grateful to William E. Dahlquist for facilitating my research in the Department.
- 20 These (and other one-liners) appeared in a two-page spread in *The New York Times*, 26 September, 2004, pp. AR 12-13.
- 21 Dargis, Manohla, film review, 'With Many a Fear and Tear, Firefighters Prove Their Mettle', *The New York Times*, 1 October, 2004, p. E12.
- 22 Quoted in Richard C. Yokley, *TV Firefighters* (California, 2003), pp. 157-58
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 159
- 24 Bachelard, Gaston, *Fragments of A Poetics Of Fire*, p. 68
- 25 *ibid.*

Euan Macleod *Iron John* 2000  
oil on canvas  
51.0 x 38.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

## List of works

### **Rick Amor**

(b. 1948)

*Untitled* (bushfire) 2003

charcoal on paper

50.0 x 100.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

© Rick Amor

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

### **G. W. Bot**

(b. 1954)

*Burnt garden* (diptych) 2003

linocut

92.0 x 52.0 cm (each sheet)

Courtesy of the artist

© G. W. Bot

### **David Bowers**

(b. 1959 England)

*Parkes Street burning* 2003

oil on board

93.0 x 123.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney

© David Bowers

Photograph by Greg Weight

### **Cressida Campbell**

(b. 1960)

*Burnt bush* 1991

colour woodblock (watercolour on plywood)

60.0 x 90.0 cm

Private collection, Sydney

© Cressida Campbell

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Photograph by Greg Weight

### **Tom Carment**

(b. 1954)

*Burnt bush, Ku-rin-gai* 1994

oil on wood panel

18.0 x 15.5 cm (image); 44.0 x 39.0 cm

Private collection, Sydney

© Tom Carment

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia 2004

Photograph by Greg Weight

*Burnt bush, McCarr's Creek II* 2004

oil on paper

50.0 x 75.0 cm (image); 95.0 x 110.0 cm (frame)

Courtesy of the artist

© Tom Carment

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia 2004

Photograph by Greg Weight

**Jon Cattapan**

(b. 1956)

*Church alight, East Melbourne* 1988

oil on canvas

183.0 x 289.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Bellas Milani, Kaliman and Sutton Galleries

© Jon Cattapan

Photograph by Andrew Curtis

*From the Shoalhaven fires* 2003

gouache on 24 sheets of paper

21.0 x 30.0 cm (each sheet)

Courtesy of the artist and Bellas Milani, Kaliman and Sutton Galleries

© Jon Cattapan

Photograph by Andrew Curtis

**Judy Cotton**

(b. 1941 )

*Fires, Hill End* 2001

watercolour and gouache on paper

80.0 x 100.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist

© Judy Cotton

**Elisabeth Cummings**

(b. 1934)

*After the fires, Wedderburn* 1994

oil on canvas

181.0 x 181.0 cm

Collection: King Street Gallery on Burton, Sydney

© Elisabeth Cummings

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

**Dolly Nampitjinpa Daniels**

Warlpiri (c1935 – 2004)

**Uni Nampitjinpa Martin**

Warlpiri born (b. c1942)

*Warlukurlangu Jukurrpa (fire country Dreaming)* 1988

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

182.4 x 121.8 cm

Purchased from Admission Funds, 1988

National Gallery of Victoria

© Dolly Nampitjinpa Daniels, Lucky Nampitjinpa Martin

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

**Ed Douglas**

(b. USA 1943)

*Ash Wednesday, near Eagle On The Hill, South Australia I* 1983

type c photograph

22.8 x 45.2 cm

Courtesy of the artist

© Ed Douglas

*Ash Wednesday, near Eagle On The Hill, South Australia II* 1983

type c photograph

23.5 x 48.1 cm

Courtesy of the artist

© Ed Douglas

**John Firth-Smith**

(b. 1943)

*Ember Rim* 1970

acrylic on cotton

183.0 x 244.0 cm

Private collection, Sydney

© John Firth-Smith

Photograph by Greg Weight

**Shane Fitzgerald**

(b. 1973)

*Inferno, Arnhem land* 2002

duralux print

127.0 x 187.0 cm

Private collection, Rockhampton

© Shane Fitzgerald

**Naylor Gill**

(1873 – 1945)

*(Bushfire, Gippsland c.1910)*

oil on canvas

65 x 105 cm

Private collection, Bathurst

Photograph by Paul Green

**Eugène von Guérard**

(b.1812, Vienna; arr. Vic. 1852; d.1901, UK)

*Bushfire between Mount Elephant and Timboon, 1857 1859*

oil on canvas mounted on board

34.8 x 56.3 cm

Collection: Ballarat Fine Art Gallery

Gift of Lady Currie in memory of her husband, the late Sir Alan Currie, 1948

**Weaver Hawkins**

(b.1893 UK; d. Aus. 1977)

*Bushfire* 1960

oil on masonite

76.0 x 101.5 cm

Private collection, courtesy of Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney

**Peter Kingston**

(b. 1943)

*So you think I did it?* 2004

etching with watercolour

40.0 x 30.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries

© Peter Kingston

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Photograph by Greg Weight

**Audrey Kngwarreye and Lucky Kngwarreye**

Utopia

Alyawarr

*Untitled (old time landscape)* 1992

synthetic polymer paint on poly/cotton

208.5 x 151.0 cm

Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

© reproduced courtesy Utopia Art Sydney

Photograph: Diana Panuccio for AGNSW

**Euan Macleod**

(b. NZ 1956)

*Exquisite corpse with fire* 2000/01

oil on canvas

180.0 x 137.0 cm

Private collection, Sydney

© Euan Macleod

*Fire Figure I* 2001

oil on canvas

51.0 x 38.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist

© Euan Macleod

*M.C. Fire (sky)* 2002

oil on canvas

51.0 x 38.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist

© Euan Macleod

*Iron John* 2000

oil on canvas

51.0 x 38.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist

© Euan Macleod

*Fire I John – Napoleon Reef* 2003

oil on canvas

51.0 x 38.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist

© Euan Macleod

**Ian Marr**

(b. 1957)

*From women's eyes* 2004

Capricorn buff sandstone, letter-cut inscription

40.0 x 400.0 x 3.0 cm

Collection the artist

© Ian Marr

**Claudine Marzik**

(b. Switzerland 1957)

*After fire II* 2004

acrylic on canvas

110.0 x 130.0 cm

Collection of the artist

© Claudine Marzik

Photograph by Michael Marzik

**Henry Mulholland**

(b. 1962)

*Burnt scrub, orange and blue ground* 2002

colour woodcut on lwaki paper; Edition 2/5

34.0 x 20.0 cm (image)

Courtesy of the artist and Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney

© Henry Mulholland

Photograph by Greg Weight

*Skeletal scrub - black/red I* 2002

colour woodcut on lwaki paper; Edition 2/5

34.0 x 20.0 cm (image)

Courtesy of the artist and Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney

© Henry Mulholland

Photograph by Greg Weight

**Lorna Nimmo**

(1920 – 1991)

*The bush fire's passage* 1952

oil on aluminium

40.7 x 50.8 cm

Purchased 1954

Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

© AGNSW

Photograph: Brenton McGeachie for AGNSW

**Sidney Nolan**

(b. Aus, 1917- d. UK 1992)

*Fire, Palais de Danse, St Kilda* 1945

ripolin on hardboard

91.5 x 122.0 cm

Private collection, Sydney

**Ken Orchard**

(b. 1959)

*Burnt ridge National Park* 1994

charcoal on 15 sheets of paper

231.0 x 285.0 cm (overall)

Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

© Ken Orchard

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Photograph by Ken Orchard

**Rodney Pople**

(b. 1952)

*(Untitled)* 2004

oil on plywood

91.5 x 61.0 cm

Collection of the artist

© Rodney Pople

Photograph by Greg Weight

**Michael Ramsden**

(b. 1947)

*Burn the river first* 2004

oil, acrylic, shellac and marble dust on plywood panel

100 x 190 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney

© Michael Ramsden

Photograph by Greg Weight

**Brian Rogers**

*Crescendo I* 2003

digitised print on paper

69.0 x 89.0 cm

Collection: Australian Sugar Industry Museum

© Brian Rogers

*Trash glow II* 2003  
digitised print on paper  
69.0 x 89.0 cm  
Collection: Australian Sugar Industry Museum  
© Brian Rogers

**Jörg Schmeisser**

(b. Germany 1942; arr. Aus. 1976)  
*Canefield near Bundaberg*, Queensland 1989  
etching on 3 sheets of paper  
61.0 x 147.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries  
© Jörg Schmeisser  
Photograph by Greg Weight

**Wendy Sharpe**

(b. 1960)  
*Hill End* 1994  
oil on canvas  
48.5 x 60.0 cm  
Private collection, Sydney  
© Wendy Sharpe  
Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004  
Photograph by Greg Weight

**Garry Shead**

(b. 1942)  
*Martin Sharp* 1986  
oil and collage on canvas  
198.0 x 122.0 cm (image); 206.5 x 130.5 cm (frame)  
Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra  
Gift of the artist 2004  
© Garry Shead  
Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

**Wesley Stacey**

(b. 1941)  
*Fleshy tree in smouldering forest* 1981  
type C photograph  
36.7 x 55.4 cm (image)  
Lady (Warwick) Fairfax Acquisition Fund 1984  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
© Wesley Stacey

*Smouldering swamp* 1981

type C photograph  
35.4 x 55.5 cm (image)  
Lady (Warwick) Fairfax Acquisition Fund 1984  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
© Wesley Stacey

**Tim Storrier**

(b. 1949)  
*The ladder* 1993  
acrylic on canvas  
243.8 x 304.8 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
©Tim Storrier

*The innuendo of impermanence* 1983

type C photograph  
50 x 60 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
©Tim Storrier

**Arthur Streeton**

(1867 – 1943)  
*Fireman's funeral, George Street* 1894  
oil on canvas  
45.3 x 38.2 cm  
Purchased 1980  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie for AGNSW

**William Strutt (after)**

(b.1825 UK; arr. Vic. 1850; d.1915 UK)  
*Black Thursday, an episode of the Australian bush fires, February 6 1851*  
c.1864  
engraving  
18 x 55cm  
Private collection, Bathurst  
Photograph by Paul Green

**Michael Taylor**

(b. 1933)  
*Kiandra (Summer '03)* 2003  
oil on canvas  
152.5 x 122.0 cm  
Collection of James Mollison AO  
© Michael Taylor  
Photograph by Viki Petherbridge

**Ronnie Tjampitjinpa**

(b. c1940)  
*Bushfire* 2003  
acrylic on linen  
122.0 x 300.0 cm  
Private collection, courtesy of Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane  
© Ronnie Tjampitjinpa  
Photograph by Jon Linkins

*(Bushfire)* 2003

acrylic on linen  
202.0 x 305.0 cm  
Private collection, courtesy of Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane  
© Ronnie Tjampitjinpa  
Photograph by Viki Petherbridge

**Arthur Wicks**

(b. 1937)  
*Beacon* 2004  
wood, fibreglass, LEDs, programmable logical controller (PLC), audio  
140.0 x 63.0 cm (diameter)  
Courtesy of the artist  
© Arthur Wicks  
Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

**Fred Williams**

(1927 – 1982)

*Landscape with burning tree II* 1968/69

oil on canvas

122.0 x 132.5 cm

Collection: Estate of Fred Williams, Melbourne

© Fred Williams

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Photograph by Viki Petherbridge

**John Wolseley**

(b. UK 1936; arr. Aus. 1976)

*Beyond Mission Beach – Fire and the Cassowary*, 2002/04

carbonised wood and watercolour on paper

140 x 448 cm

Courtesy of John Wolseley and Australian Galleries

© John Wolseley

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Mackay only

*The slender leaved Mallee Desert Banksia, Scub Casuarina, the Willaroo and the last of the Regent Honeyeaters* 2004

etching (edition 20)

60.0 x 131.0 cm (image)

Courtesy of John Wolseley and Australian Galleries

© John Wolseley

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Photograph by Viki Petherbridge

*Leporello of six months in Royal National Park I* 2002

watercolour, carbonised wood on paper

18.5 x 294.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries

© John Wolseley

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Photograph by Viki Petherbridge

*Isopogon frot – Royal National Park* 2002

carbonised wood and watercolour on Blue lake 'Brolga' handmade paper

71.0 x 155.5 cm (sheet)

Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries

© John Wolseley

Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

Photograph by Viki Petherbridge

## Tour venues



Artspace Mackay, Queensland

## Acknowledgements

### **Artspace Mackay**

18 March – 1 May 2005

### **Rockhampton Art Gallery**

6 May – 19 June 2005

### **Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville**

24 June – 21 August 2005

### **Gladstone Regional Art Gallery and Museum**

2 September – 29 October 2005

### **Hazelhurst Regional Gallery**

5 December 2005 – 5 February 2006

### **Wagga Wagga Regional Art Gallery**

10 February – 9 April 2006

### **Bathurst Regional Art Gallery**

11 May – 25 June 2006

### **Ballarat Fine Art Gallery**

7 July – 3 September 2006

### **Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery**

3 October – 19 November 2006

### **University Art Museum, Brisbane**

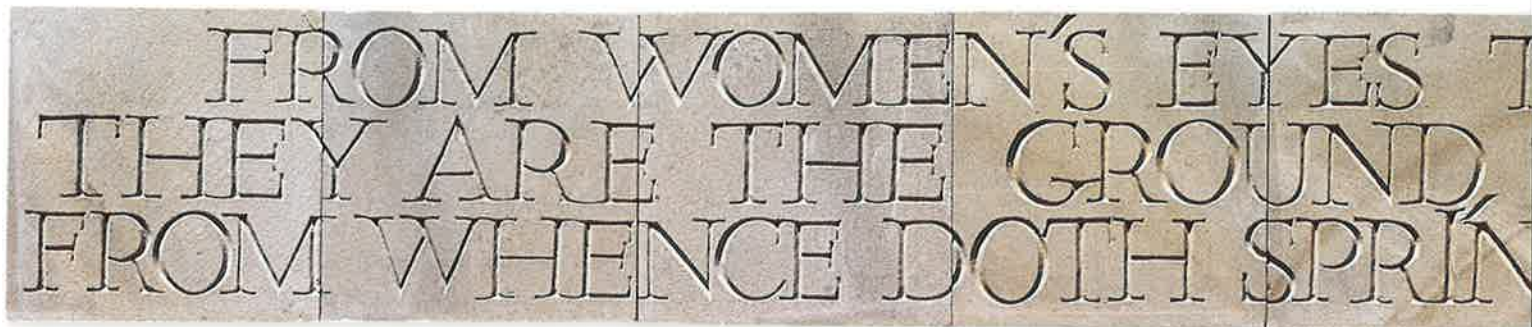
24 November 2006 – 20 February 2007

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**Gavin Wilson**



FROM WOMEN'S EYES T  
THEY ARE THE GROUND  
FROM WHENCE DOTH SPRIN

Ian Marr *From women's eyes* 2004  
capricorn buff sandstone, letter-cut inscription  
40.0 x 400.0 x 3.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



IS DOCTRINE I DERIVE  
THE BOOKS, THE ACADEMIES  
THE TRUE PROMETHEAN FIRE



Tim Storrier *The innuendo of impermanence* 1983  
type C photograph  
50 x 60 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Gavin Wilson is an independent curator, award-winning landscape architect and author based in Sydney. Over the past decade, his projects have met with both public and critical acclaim. His wide-ranging exhibitions and illustrated catalogues focus on the inter-connected themes of landscape and culture in the Australian experience. He is the consultant curator for the Hill End Artists-in-Residence Program in association with the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery. Gavin Wilson is the author of *The Artists of Hill End* (Art Gallery of New South Wales and Beagle Press 1995), *Escape Artists: Modernists in the Tropics* (Cairns Regional Gallery 1998), *John Firth-Smith: A Voyage that Never Ends* (Craftsman House 2000) *Harbourlights: The Art & Times of Peter Kingston* (Craftsman House 2005)

[www.gavinwilson.com.au](http://www.gavinwilson.com.au)

After a teaching career in South Africa and Britain, Dr Alan Krell is now Associate Professor at the School of Art History and Theory, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney. Topics for his journal articles on French painting of the late 19th century have included Edouard Manet, Realism and contemporary social and sexual attitudes. He is the author of *Fred Cress: Stages* (Sydney, 1988), *Manet and the Painters of Contemporary Life* (London, 1996), and *The Devil's Rope: A cultural history of barbed wire* (London, 2002). Alan Krell is writing a book on fire in the social imagination to be published by Reaktion Books, London, in 2007.

