



**A curious nature—**  
the landscape as theatre in  
contemporary photography  
and new media

G E E E L O N Z  
E E L O N Z  
L E L O N Z  
L O N G A T L L E R Y  
N G A L L E R Y  
G A L L E R Y

*This world is so strange that anything may happen, or may not happen.*

—Jorge Luis Borges

The landscape as an artistic genre holds a venerable position within the history of Western civilisation: it is however, essentially a cultural construct. Through the work of seven contemporary Australian artists practicing in the realm of photo-media, this exhibition explores the landscape—whether in its natural and urban forms, or as painted backdrops—as a theatre or setting for the enactment of elaborate narratives.

Working in the format of still or moving images to record stylised poses or movements—often of a peculiar or absurdist nature, which the artists perform themselves or direct others to act out—Kate Bernauer, Siri Hayes, Gabriella Mangano, Silvana Mangano, Polixeni Papapetrou, Jacqui Stockdale, and Christian Thompson introduce an additional layer of intrigue or meaning upon the landscape: literally presenting a staged moment or action within a constructed scene.

Siri Hayes uses the landscape as the setting for large format works through which she investigates the significance and multiple histories of place, with a particular focus on the impact of European settlement on the environment.

In *Lyric Theatre at Merri Creek, 2002* CAT. NO. 4, Hayes applies compositional elements reminiscent of the paintings of 17th century artists such as Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin to the inner city Melbourne waterway near which she then resided (and within close proximity to what is thought to be the site of the signing of the treaty between the Wurundjeri people and settler John Batman in 1835). Described by Batman in his journal as ‘a beautifull [*sic*] stream of water’ (6 June 1835, State Library of Victoria), the creek photographed by Hayes appears to be polluted and the bank is lined by wildly growing imported trees. Using these to frame the scene, the artist positions three small figures within the landscape as though standing on a theatre stage—one holding a manuscript suggestive of being the narrator of a scene about to unfold,

the additional two conversing as though awaiting their cue to perform.

Hayes posits a seemingly absurdist act within a sublime landscape in *Plein Air Explorers, 2008* CAT. NO. 6, whilst simultaneously referencing art historical precedents and critiquing the environmental impact of land clearing in the Gippsland region. In Hayes’ work, the model of a life drawing class—held *en plein air*—assumes the stance of the subject of 19th century artist Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Mist* (Kunsthalle Hamburg). In this witty re-interpretation of Friedrich’s well-known painting of circa 1818, Hayes replaces the clothed explorer with the nude model, positions him on a low tree stump rather than a mountain outcrop, and substitutes the atmospheric European vista of the earlier work with a felled landscape in which the smokestacks of the Latrobe Valley appear on the distant horizon, creating their own ‘sea of mist’. The central concern of Friedrich’s painting—the contemplation of the grandeur of nature—has been usurped by the students’ intent focus on the nude model.

More recently the landscape of Spain has been the setting for works inspired by a three-month residency in Barcelona. In *Prickly Pears and Mumbling Old Stones, 2011* CAT. NO. 7, Hayes photographs herself, her partner and their children as masked figures (in acknowledgement of the city’s Mardi Gras Carnival) within a walled cacti garden, as a means of considering issues of identity while being in an unfamiliar place. In this work she also makes reference to environmental issues resulting from Australia’s colonisation. Cochineal-infested specimens of Prickly Pear (from which the red colourant is extracted) were brought to Australia by Sir Joseph Banks as a means of establishing a dye industry in the British colonies to rival the domination of Spain and Portugal—the plant has since become one of the most invasive weeds introduced to this country.

Masked figures also populate the photographs of Polixeni Papapetrou from the 2009–12 series *Between Worlds*. In these square format works, the artist continues her creative collaboration with



her children and their peers, staging them in various landscape settings wearing masks modeled in the forms of animal heads.

Papapetrou's chosen settings—variously grand mountainous vistas, harvested fields, bushland regenerating after fire or ragged coastal escarpments—play host to a myriad of hybrid creatures who take on assigned roles (more often associated with the working life of adults). Photographed largely in regional Victoria, the landscapes act as backdrops for Papapetrou's rich narratives that straddle childhood and adulthood, reality and fantasy, animal and human—literally 'between worlds'.

While in many of her earlier works the subject was positioned in front of a painted backdrop within the studio, the transition to the outdoor setting is likened by Papapetrou to the maturation of her children: having moved from the more contained fantasy realm of their pre-school years to the experiences of the wider world associated with their progression towards early teenage years.

Through these works, Papapetrou aims to address the complex emotions that are associated with this transitional phase and the importance of role play in children's development.

In *The Wanderer*, 2009 CAT. NO. 13, the solitary figure is modeled on the subject of Friedrich's *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Mist* (albeit more directly framed in the composition than Hayes' *Plein Air Explorers*). The dress-coated, reindeer-headed model stands before an expansive mountainous setting reminiscent of the vista seen in the German Romantic painter's work. However, unlike Friedrich's subject, the face of Papapetrou's model is visible (the reindeer anthropomorphised to suggest an expression of both awe and curiosity).

While many interpretations of Friedrich's work have been made, a reading that resonates with Papapetrou's photographic series is that of the 19th century painting being a metaphor for an unknown future—a notion that could be associated with the uncertainty of moving from childhood through adolescence to adulthood.

Kate Bernauer addresses the challenges of navigating the contemporary world in her aptly titled series *I Need a Compass Not an Anchor*. In Bernauer's highly stage-managed compositions, actors strike unusual poses within the urban constructed landscape: her images act as metaphors for the absurdities of modern, Western life. According to the artist,

The meaning and purpose we give to our lives has become increasingly abstract. We live in a consumerist culture, conditioned to be dissatisfied with our lives. We are persuaded to value activities with unclear motivations and unknown ends.

Central to this series is Bernauer's exploration of how we engage with the urban environment (particularly as we become increasingly dislocated from the natural world) and how we interact with one another within constructed, artificial spaces.

In each of the exhibited works, Bernauer emphasises the isolation that can be experienced within contemporary society despite being more technologically connected than at any other time in history. There is a strong sense of human dislocation within the images, with each of the figures having little relationship with the others, or any real purpose within the scene.

The title of individual works allows for additional layers of interpretation: *The Underpass*, 2010–11 CAT. NO. 1, for example, conjures notions of a constructed pathway allowing safe passage for pedestrians. However, in this work Bernauer stages three individuals in poses that suggest a more complex journey through modern life—feelings of vulnerability or detachment are conveyed by a figure lying in a foetal position, another leaning obliquely on a wall supported by his head with arms hanging limply, and the third with her back to the viewer.

Jacqui Stockdale takes leave of 'the modern world of distractions', employing the tropes of late-19th century studio photography in images from the series *The Quiet Wild*. Combining her skills as a photographer and painter, Stockdale creates vibrant tableaux reminiscent of the constructed anthropological



photographs of JW Lindt, such as those in his portfolio *Australian Aboriginals* of circa 1873 (National Gallery of Victoria).

As with Lindt's photographs, Stockdale positions her subjects in front of studio backdrops depicting the landscape and equips them with props that aid our interpretation of their identity. In a further reference to styles of photographic presentation of the late-1800s, a printed frame borders the images in the style of a *carte-de-visite*.

Taking additional inspiration from the masks of the Mexican Carnival and the dioramas at the anthropological museum in Mexico City, Stockdale's fantastic characters evolve through a lengthy performative process. The artist paints the bodies of her models, dresses them in elaborate costumes, provides exotic masks or accessories, and directs each in the shaping of a character over the course of the photographic session. Her models include family members and friends, while the painted backdrops are based on significant locations in the artist's life: her mother's property in Long Gully, Bendigo; the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne; or Lake St Clair, Tasmania.

*Rama-Jaara the Royal Shepherdess*, 2012 CAT. NO. 19, depicts a young girl staring confidently at the viewer, dressed in an exquisite costume inspired by the attire of Infanta Margarita in Velázquez's 1656 painting *Las Meninas* (Prado Museum)—a work that has been extensively analysed in relation to concepts of reality and illusion, issues that Stockdale's photographs also address. Standing in front of the painting of the Long Gully landscape, the character's assigned name makes reference to the original inhabitants of the Bendigo region (the Jaara people) while her hairstyle is fashioned in the shape of a ram's horns.

Christian Thompson assumes a variety of characters in his 2009 series *Lost Together* through which he investigates issues of identity, family history and place. An extended absence from Australia to undertake a two-year residency in Amsterdam brought about a development in the artist's working method: from a practice largely

based on studio self-portraiture to the photographs of this series in which the Dutch landscape is the setting for the appearance of several characters inspired by his origins. According to Thompson, "Moving out of the studio is ... symbolic of moving geographically in the world and moving forward artistically."

In these works, the European landscape becomes the context for the artist to further explore his Indigenous Australian and British heritage: he adopts various personae through which he literally channels his ancestry while addressing issues relating to aspects of Indigenous culture.

Poised like a wood sprite in the fork of a tree, the subject of *Hannah's Diary*, 2009 CAT. NO. 22, is based on an ancestor of the artist: the author of a journal describing early pioneering life in Australia from a female perspective. Similarly finding himself in a foreign place, Thompson assumes the character of Hannah and holds a bright orange didgeridoo (a reference to the colour associated with the lineage of the Dutch Royal Family) painted with traditional Indigenous motifs. The text printed on the figure's clothing invites the viewer to question issues of authenticity—possibly of the 'otherworldliness' of Hannah herself, of interpretations of documented histories, or of representations of Indigenous culture more broadly (as suggested by the wind instrument).

Another character, the tartan-clad and bearded Isaac from Bampton, Oxfordshire (from where a number of the artist's maternal ancestors originate), is the subject of a portrait titled *Beauty of Jellingroo*, 2009 CAT. NO. 20—a reference to a property in Gundagai, New South Wales, owned by Thompson's distant forebears and well-known in the late-19th century for its huge flock of black merino sheep (that had died out by the early 1900s due to inbreeding).

And in additional works CAT. NOS 21 & 23, Thompson assumes the personification of a flowering plant native to Australia, the *Xanthorrhoea* tree (previously known as 'Black Boy', a reference to its form being thought to resemble an Indigenous



figure holding an upright spear—the Dutch phrase used to title these works ‘Donkere Jongen’ translates to ‘Dark Boy’). In this manifestation, Thompson inserts himself into the European forest, and in doing so, effectively inverts the introduction of exotic plant species to Australia brought about by European settlement.

As with Thompson, the experience of being located away from Australia led Gabriella Mangano and Silvana Mangano to move beyond the studio setting (in which their video works had often been staged) to engage with an unfamiliar landscape: that of El Bruc in central Spain, while they were based on a month-long residency.

The diverse scenery of the region—the dramatic peaks of the Montserrat mountains, the grassed fields at their base, the dry and dusty terrain, and the rows of almond trees—became the set in which the artists perform actions that are informed by their drawing practices.

In the black and white video work, *The Surround*, 2009 CAT. NO. 8, the jagged mountain range is the background to the artists’ performance in which they slowly navigate a path through tall windswept grass. Walking on bentwood chairs which extend their lower limbs, each step requires skillful coordination. The sisters move apart and come together as they encircle each other: the paths they take akin to drawing upon the landscape.

The triptych *Time Lapse 1, Time Lapse 2, Time Lapse 3*, 2009 CAT. NO. 9, charts the artists’ journey towards the location that was the setting for a number of works produced during the residency. In the projected work, two smaller images on the far left and far right, depict a figure slowly walking or crawling along a rocky landscape. The rotation of these images disrupts the viewer’s reading of the barren terrain, while the reduced speed of the video—particularly in the central image of a figure swinging back and forth from a tree branch—is simultaneously hypnotic. While reflecting one of the rituals of an artistic practice (in essence, the journey to their outdoor studio), the triptych could also be interpreted as being symbolic of the challenges and distractions inherent in their creative process.

That each of the artists in this exhibition works in the medium of photography or video is what makes these works particularly compelling (as a modern point of difference to paintings from earlier centuries that may have similarly depicted theatrical narratives within the landscape). In many cases, the scenarios the artists present are quite unreal, which is at odds with our general expectations of the camera largely capturing reality. As Susan Sontag states in *On Photography*, “Photographs furnish evidence, something we hear about but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it.”

Whether re-interpreting historical works—that pre-date the invention of certain photographic methods—to address environmental issues or emotional concerns (as in the case of Siri Hayes and Polixeni Papapetrou), using the urban landscape as a metaphor for our modern condition (Kate Bernauer), adopting the tropes of early studio photography (Jacqui Stockdale), or taking inspiration from a foreign location (Christian Thompson, Gabriella Mangano and Silvana Mangano), each of the artists in this exhibition engage the landscape as a setting in which to stage narratives that variously explore issues of identity, our place in the world, history, the colonisation of Australia, the environment, or the eternal complexities of life.

In a recent conference paper titled ‘Landscape and memory’, academic Ken Taylor asserts

We see and make landscapes as a result of our shared system of beliefs and ideologies. In this way landscape is a cultural construct, a mirror of our memories and myths encoded with meanings which can be read and interpreted.

In choosing to posit narratives within the landscape (with all that this cultural construct represents) the artists in this exhibition emphasise the universality of the concerns they seek to address. Their, at times, whimsical, peculiar, even absurdist imagery, endeavours to find meaning in what Borges referred to as this ‘strange world’.

## List of works

all works are height x width in cm  
(unless otherwise stated)

### Kate Bernauer

Australian, born 1975,  
lives and works in Brisbane

CAT. NO. 1  
*The Underpass* 2010–11  
archival inkjet on cotton rag  
111.0 x 148.0 (frame),  
edition of 5  
Courtesy of the artist

CAT. NO. 2  
*The Airport* 2011  
archival inkjet on cotton rag  
111.0 x 148.0 (frame),  
edition of 5  
Courtesy of the artist

CAT. NO. 3  
*Gravity* 2012  
archival inkjet on cotton rag  
111.0 x 148.0 (frame),  
edition of 5  
Courtesy of the artist  
[all exhibited works are from  
the series *I Need a Compass  
Not an Anchor*]

### Siri Hayes

Australian, born 1977,  
lives and works in Melbourne

CAT. NO. 4  
*Lyric Theatre at Merri Creek* 2002  
type C print  
112.0 x 142.0, edition of 10  
Purchased 2005  
Monash University Collection  
Courtesy of Monash University  
Museum of Art, Melbourne  
[from the series *Lyric Theatre*]

CAT. NO. 5  
*Scene 3* 2003  
type C print  
112.0 x 142.0, edition of 10  
Purchased 2005  
Monash University Collection  
Courtesy of Monash University  
Museum of Art, Melbourne  
[from the series *Lyric Theatre*]

CAT. NO. 6  
*Plein Air Explorers* 2008  
type C print  
107.0 x 142.0, edition of 6  
Purchased 2008  
Monash University Collection  
Courtesy of Monash University  
Museum of Art, Melbourne  
[from the series *En Plein Air*]

CAT. NO. 7  
*Prickly Pears and Mumbling  
Old Stones* 2011  
type C print  
79.9 x 103.9, edition of 6  
Courtesy of the artist  
[from the series *All You Knit  
is Love*]

### Gabriella Mangano

Australian, born 1972,  
lives and works in Melbourne

### Silvana Mangano

Australian, born 1972,  
lives and works in Melbourne

CAT. NO. 8  
*The Surround* 2009  
digital video, 2:05 minutes 16:9,  
black & white, sound,  
edition of 5  
Courtesy of the artists  
and Anna Schwartz Gallery,  
Melbourne & Sydney

CAT. NO. 9  
*Time Lapse 1, Time Lapse 2,  
Time Lapse 3* 2009  
three-channel video,  
16:9, black & white,  
silent, edition of 5  
Courtesy of the artists  
and Anna Schwartz Gallery,  
Melbourne & Sydney

**Polixeni Papapetrou**

Australian, born 1960,  
lives and works in Melbourne

CAT. NO. 10

*The Digger* 2009

pigment ink print

105.0 x 105.0, edition of 8

Courtesy of the artist and  
Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne;  
Stills Gallery, Sydney;  
Jenkins Johnson Gallery,  
New York & San Francisco

CAT. NO. 11

*The Harvesters* 2009

pigment ink print

105.0 x 105.0, edition of 8

Courtesy of the artist and  
Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne;  
Stills Gallery, Sydney;  
Jenkins Johnson Gallery,  
New York & San Francisco

CAT. NO. 12

*The Loners* 2009

pigment ink print

105.0 x 105.0, edition of 8

Courtesy of the artist and  
Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne;  
Stills Gallery, Sydney;  
Jenkins Johnson Gallery,  
New York & San Francisco

CAT. NO. 13

*The Wanderer* 2009

pigment ink print

105.0 x 105.0, edition of 8

Courtesy of the artist and  
Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne;  
Stills Gallery, Sydney;  
Jenkins Johnson Gallery,  
New York & San Francisco

CAT. NO. 14

*The Violinist* 2012

pigment ink print

105.0 x 105.0, edition of 8

Courtesy of the artist and  
Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne;  
Stills Gallery, Sydney;  
Jenkins Johnson Gallery,  
New York & San Francisco  
[all exhibited works are from  
the series *Between Worlds*]

**Jacqui Stockdale**

Australian, born 1968,  
lives and works in Melbourne

CAT. NO. 15

*Crudelia de Mon Della Botanica* 2012

type C print

100.0 x 78.0, edition of 6

Courtesy of the artist and  
Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 16

*El Gato, Leeawuleena* 2012

type C print

100.0 x 78.0, edition of 6

Courtesy of the artist and  
Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 17

*Les Jumeaux* 2012

type C print

100.0 x 78.0, edition of 6

Courtesy of the artist and  
Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 18

*Luchadora Botanica* 2012

type C print

100.0 x 78.0, edition of 6

Courtesy of the artist and  
Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 19

*Rama-Jaara the Royal**Shepherdess* 2012

type C print

100.0 x 78.0, edition of 6

Courtesy of the artist and  
Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne  
[all exhibited works are from  
the series *The Quiet Wild*]

**Christian Thompson**

Australian (Bidjara), born 1978,  
lives and works in Oxford

CAT. NO. 20

*Beauty of Jellingroo* 2009

type C print

100.0 x 100.0, edition of 5

Courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 21

*Flowering Spear—**Donkere Jongen die Speer**Rechttop Houdt 2* 2009

type C print

100.0 x 100.0, edition of 5

Courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 22

*Hannah's Diary* 2009

type C print

100.0 x 100.0, edition of 5

Courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

CAT. NO. 23

*Xanthorrhoea Australis—**Donkere Jongen uit Nederland 2*

2009

type C print

100.0 x 100.0, edition of 5

Courtesy of the artist and  
Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne  
[all exhibited works are from  
the series *Lost Together*]

**Acknowledgements**

Whether gently beguiling, mildly unsettling or arcane and captivating in aspect, the photo-media images in this exhibition recall, to some extent, the curious attitudes and bizarre antics associated with characters in landscape fables by early Flemish painters such as Brueghel, Bosch and the brothers Bril. As the critic Laura Gascoigne observed in a recent review in *The Spectator* (20 October 2012) of an exhibition focussed on these artists and their like-minded contemporaries, "to the Flemish, landscape was a blank canvas on which the artist's imagination was free to roam". So too, in these contemporary images it is the case that urban and regional landscapes are enlisted as poignant or value-laden settings for contemporary fables, if we may so describe the transactions depicted—in which idiosyncratic costume drama or curious actions assume a narrative force that must be reckoned with.

In preparing and presenting this exhibition, the Geelong Gallery is indebted to the participating artists—Kate Bernauer, Siri Hayes, Gabriella Mangano, Silvana Mangano, Polixeni Papapetrou, Jacqui Stockdale and Christian Thompson—for their enthusiastic cooperation during all stages of the project, for their kindness in lending the works on display and for engaging with associated exhibition activities where possible.

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**Geoffrey Edwards**

Director, Geelong Gallery

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## COVER

Siri Hayes

*Plein Air Explorers* (detail) 2008

type C print

107.0 x 142.0 cm, edition of 6

Purchased 2008

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Courtesy of Monash University  
Museum of Art, Melbourne

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