



Media Release

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Exhume the grave— McCubbin and contemporary art

14 August to 28 November 2021

Free entry | Open daily 10.00am to 5.00pm



Jill Orr
Exhume the grave: Medium (detail) 1999
C-type print
Geelong Gallery
Purchased through the Victorian
Public Galleries Trust, 1999
© Jill Orr, Courtesy of the artist
Photographers: Bruce Parker and
Joanne Haslam for Jill Orr

After extended periods of closure, Geelong Gallery opens *Exhume the grave—McCubbin and contemporary art* on Saturday 14 August. The exhibition includes works by contemporary Australian artists in response to **Frederick McCubbin's** enduringly popular narrative paintings set within the Australian bush.

Exhume the grave provides a contemporary counterpoint to *Frederick McCubbin—Whisperings in wattle boughs*, an exhibition that celebrates the Gallery's first significant acquisition, McCubbin's *A bush burial*.

Whisperings in wattle boughs opens on Saturday 4 September and is programmed in celebration of the Gallery's 125th anniversary.

At the time of his death in December 1917, Frederick McCubbin was one of the best-known and most successful artists of his time. He was widely celebrated for his large-scale national narrative paintings including *Down on his luck* 1889, *A bush burial* 1890, and *The pioneer* 1904. The acquisition of McCubbin's 'national narrative' paintings by major public collecting institutions has undoubtedly played a significant role in the now-iconic status of these works. *Down on his luck* 1889 was acquired by the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1896; *On the wallaby track* 1896 entered the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1897; *A bush burial* 1890 was purchased by Geelong Gallery in 1900; and *The pioneer* 1904 was acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1906.

The sentiments and emotive subjects of these works have helped develop for them a popular visual literacy: they are images that have impressed themselves powerfully on public consciousness over time.

Geelong Gallery Senior Curator and exhibition curator, **Lisa Sullivan**, said 'The artists in *Exhume the grave—McCubbin and contemporary art* provide a re-evaluation and reinterpretation of key works in McCubbin's oeuvre from a First Nations, immigrant, and feminist perspective. More than a century after McCubbin painted these works, our ideas of nationhood have evolved: we understand the negative impacts of colonialism, and we have a greater understanding of the wide social diversity of immigrant experience, of the wider capabilities and contributions of women, beyond the prescribed gender roles depicted in historical narratives, and of the significant environmental impacts caused by clearing the land.'

Drawing largely from the Gallery's permanent collection, this exhibition brings together works by **Juan Davila, Jill Orr, Anne Zahalka, Polixeni Papapetrou, Christian Thompson AO** and **Robert Hague** (see overleaf for details).

—Ends—





Exhume the grave— McCubbin and contemporary art

About the works



Juan Davila
A bush burial 2000
oil on canvas
Geelong Gallery
Gift of the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and
the Geelong Gallery Foundation, 2001
© Juan Davila, Courtesy Kalli Rolfe
Contemporary Art

In **Juan Davila's** *A bush burial 2000* the artist recasts McCubbin's melancholy image of 1890 in the context of our country's social diversity and complex contemporary politics (issues that remain as relevant as they were two decades ago). The large-scale painting is from a series of works that chronicle episodes in the imagined life of the artist's alter ego Juanita Laguna—the dishevelled, dispossessed figure of the 'other' whose reflection we see in the cracked mirror. Juanita has arrived at the gateway to a new and promised land only to have their luggage torn open, and brutally examined by a burly, bare-chested customs official and his rabid dog.

Davila's second version of *A bush burial 2000*—a mixed media composition—presents a view of what lies on the other side of the mirror in Davila's painting. Here, we see the customs officer and Juanita from a different vantage point, while in the foreground a naked woman sits beside a pool of water: a composition that recalls the bush idyll of McCubbin's *Afterglow (Summer evening)* 1912.



Jill Orr
Exhume the grave: Bride 1999
C type print
Geelong Gallery
Purchased through the Victorian Public
Galleries Trust, 1999
© Jill Orr, Courtesy of the artist
Photographers: Bruce Parker and
Joanne Haslam for Jill Orr

The ritual of burial that is central to McCubbin's composition inspired **Jill Orr's** performance-based work *Exhume the grave*, staged at Geelong Gallery in April 1999. In this work Orr explored the mystery in McCubbin's painting as to the identity of the grave's occupant, and an element of the composition that hints at the artist's interest in the Spiritualist movement: the veil that hangs from the cart is thought to symbolise the transparent divide between the living and the dead. Through the central character of the 'medium' Orr conjured the spirits of the deceased or played the role of those close to them: a farm worker, Opium Lil, a mother, and a bride.



Anne Zahalka
The pioneer 1992
pigment ink on rag paper mounted onto
gatorboard
Courtesy of the artist, Arc One Gallery,
Melbourne, and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney
© Anne Zahalka

Anne Zahalka reframes the landscape and nationhood in photomontages from the series *The landscape re-presented 1983–85*. Zahalka deconstructs McCubbin's paintings to present an alternative viewpoint: one that is more reflective of actual experiences and some of the realities of life in the recent history of Australia. In *The immigrants 1983* she reworks a commercial reproduction of McCubbin's *The pioneer 1904*, collaging photographs of her family members who came to Australia as post-World War II refugees, over the archetypal Australian pioneering figures of the original version. And in *The pioneer 1992* Zahalka reworks the central panel of McCubbin's triptych removing the seated bushman to emphasise the role of women in settling the land. In these works Zahalka seeks to create a new framework for our collective memory based on diversity and inclusion.





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About the works



In **Polixeni Papapetrou's** *Haunted country* series of 2006 she frames the Australian bush as a site of mystery, dislocation, and danger. The theme of the lost child in the bush is a subject that was widely documented and interpreted in late 19th century Australian newspapers, literature, and works of art such as McCubbin's *Lost 1886* and *Lost 1907*. In *the Wimmera 1864 #1* 2006 recalls the disappearance of siblings Isaac Cooper, Jane Cooper, and Frank Duff, who were lost in mallee scrub near their home outside Horsham in the Wimmera District in August 1864. After nine days, the children were found through the skill of three First Nations trackers. Staged within the Wimmera landscape, Papapetrou engaged her two children and a family friend to evoke the experiences of the lost children and their dislocation within the bush setting.

Polixeni Papapetrou
In the Wimmera 1864 #1 2006
pigment ink print; edition 4/6
Geelong Gallery
Gift of Dr Robert Nelson through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2010
Courtesy of the Estate of Polixeni Papapetrou



In *Dead as a door nail* 2009 **Christian Thompson AO** appropriates McCubbin's *Down on his luck* 1889, drawing attention to the (historical) Eurocentric framing of Australian art history. Here, the European landscape becomes the context for the artist to explore his First Nations and British heritage: he adopts various personae through which he channels his ancestry. The tartan-clad and bearded Isaac from Bampton, Oxfordshire (from where the artist's maternal ancestors originate), is named after the artist's great grandfather. Isaac assumes the seated position of the prospector/swagman in McCubbin's painting—albeit far less despondent—while the axe leaning against the log directly references the central panel of McCubbin's *The pioneer* 1904.

Christian Thompson AO
Dead as a door nail 2009
C-type print on Fuji Pearl Metallic Paper; edition
of 5 + 2AP
Courtesy of the artist, Yavuz Gallery, Singapore/
Sydney, and Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne
© Christian Thompson AO



Robert Hague also references McCubbin's *Down on his luck* 1889 in his 2015 lithograph *Blue Claude (after McCubbin)* and a similarly titled three-dimensional porcelain plate dating to 2020. In both works, Hague transposes McCubbin's prospector into a composition by French painter and printmaker Claude Lorrain (born Claude Gellée c.1600–1682), juxtaposing the idealised landscape with the despondency of the miner.

Robert Hague
Blue Claude (after McCubbin) 2020
porcelain with transfer print, gold and brass
staples; edition 1/25
Geelong Gallery
Dorothy McAllister Bequest Fund, 2020
© Courtesy of the artist

