N G V

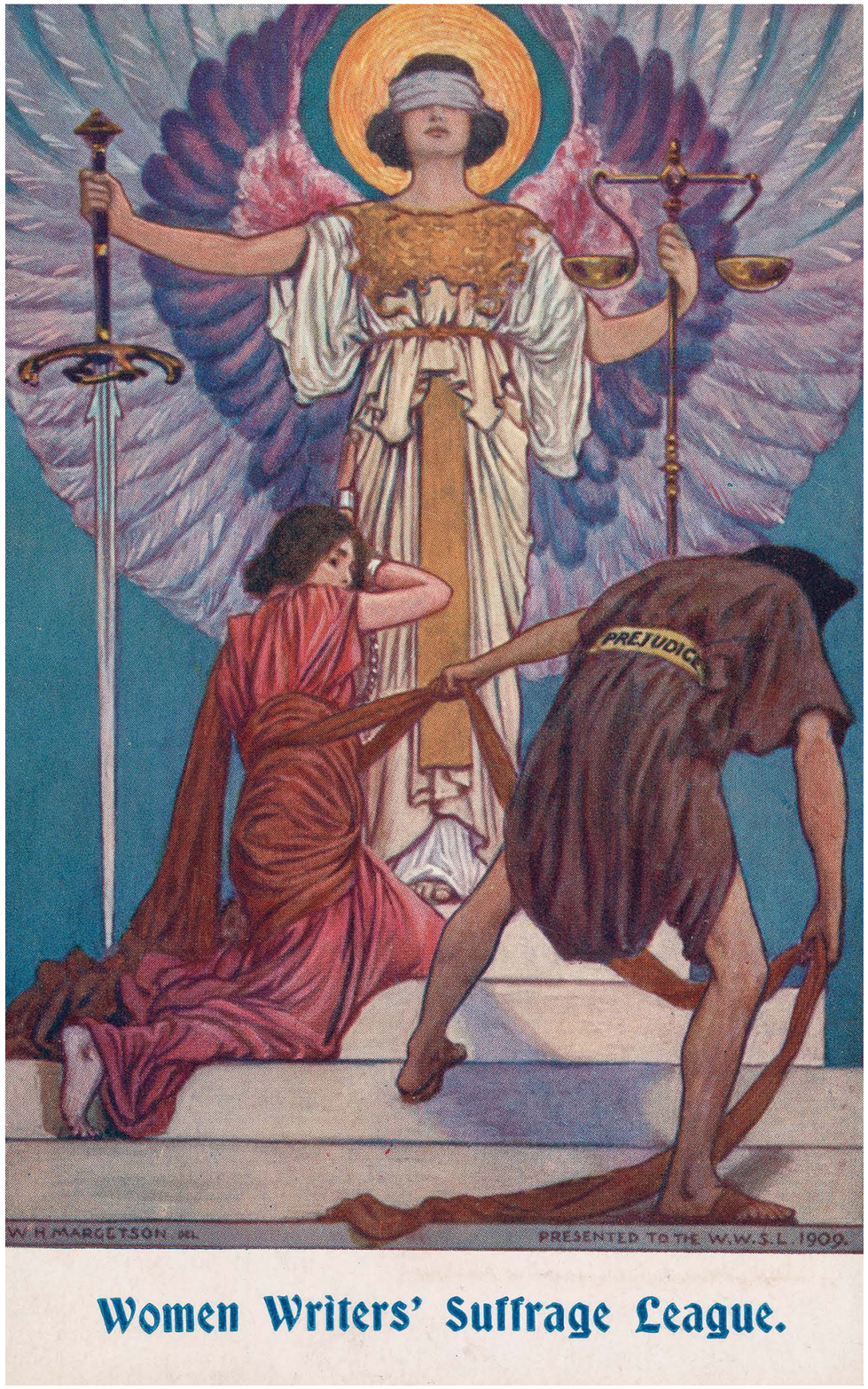
‘Art has this other-worldly capacity to bring transformation and light – and when art is brought to public spaces for all to enjoy, its magic is experienced en masse, which can bring rehumanisation.’

L. A. Chandlar, author

Deep Read

A collection of narrative non-fiction from National Gallery of Victoria’s Magazine

MAGAZINE



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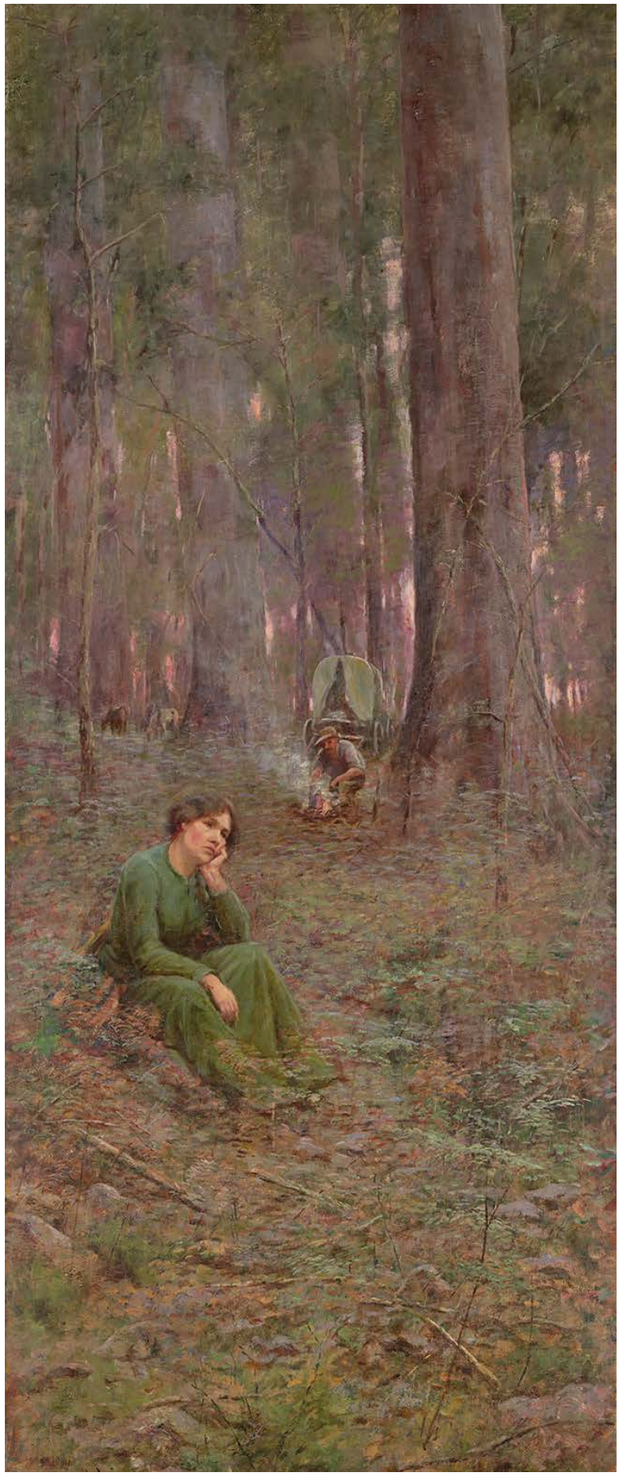


Frederick McCubbin *The pioneer* 1904
(detail). Felton Bequest, 1906

INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to introduce *NGV Magazine Collected Editions*, a new series available exclusively on *NGV Magazine Online*.

NGV Magazine is all about finding thought-provoking and inspiring ways to connect with the NGV Collection and exhibitions. Through the magazine, we invite NGV and independent writers to use art and design as the starting point to explore ideas, current issues, historical events and compelling stories. We hope that through *NGV Magazine*, our diverse community of readers and audiences will find a good story, something to inspire, and new perspectives on art and life.

These special collected editions bring together some favourite *NGV Magazine* features, including *Deep Read*. We introduced *Deep Read* with the aim of connecting talented authors directly with the NGV Collection, inviting them to use an artwork or an idea to craft a long-form narrative essay. The results are thoughtful and considered and it is exciting to see how different writers interpret a topic and the journey they take the reader on.

In this series, Jessica McLean, Macquarie University–based specialist in 'geographies of change' uses John Longstaff's *Gippsland, Sunday night, February 20th, 1898* to explore the geographies, politics and shifting narratives of environment and water in her essay 'Country without rain'.

L. A. Chandlar, best known to many as the author of the *Art Deco Mystery* series, set in 1920s New York City, takes her ability to capture the character of a city and applies it to New York City again, this time the New York as it was known by artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring during the economically and socially turbulent period of the 1980s and 1990s.

For 'Me and my muse', Kim Devereux, author of the novel *Rembrandt's Mirror*, explores a personal narrative that ponders the difference between perceiving emotion and experiencing it. Devereux uses the act of looking at art and the devices many artists have employed throughout history to influence the perception of the viewer, as a way to describe this. She writes, 'in the twentieth century, art historian Ernst Gombrich coined the term "the beholder's share" to describe what we contribute to the experience of a work of art. It is as if we and the work of art become partners ...'

In a similar vein, Australian author Cate Kennedy also surveys perception and the symbiotic relationship between artwork and audience in her essay 'A silent and invisible conversation', comparing the relationship with that of a reader engaging with a novel, and turning to an NGV work that she has viewed throughout her own life, Frederick McCubbin's *The pioneer*, 1904.

Finally, Dr Maria Quirk, NGV Assistant Curator, Acquisitions and Research, takes readers to a moment in June 1913, London to investigate one of the first global activist movements – women's suffrage – through works in the NGV's Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and Family Suffrage Research Collection.

I hope you enjoy spending time with these essays, written from Melbourne, Sydney, Teignmouth (Devon, UK) and New York.

Elisha Buttler
Deputy Editor, *NGV Magazine*
Audience Engagement Manager

Country without Rain

There is a painting in the NGV Collection by John Longstaff titled *Gippsland, Sunday Night, February 20th, 1898*. Painted more than 120 years ago, it captures a scene and a depth of emotion that still resonates after another Australian summer of bushfire and drought. The painting also captures our enduringly complex, frequently shifting relationships with our personal and collective landscapes. These are the places we work, live, create and nurture in, travel through, and sometimes, imagine from afar. When these landscapes show signs of change or exhibit temperamental or extreme conditions we may worry, but we are also enthralled.

BY JESSICA McLEAN

Growing up in Mudgee, in central-west New South Wales, my family took many road trips: we went south to Bathurst to visit grandparents, west to Dubbo for music exams and the zoo, east and northeast for the beach. These trips with my parents and nine siblings took place well before digital devices; Bruce Springsteen bootlegged recordings came from the tape player as protracted games of Twenty Questions rolled along. We had a full van. I was taught to look out the window and see the landscapes we moved through, watch thinning groundcover support the white bones of perished animals, stark and bright on grey-brown land. Note the blackberries hugging valley floors and rabbits dashing for their prickly cover. Read the erosion cutting swathes through hills and gullies, cattle and sheep sitting heavily under dotted trees of sparsely vegetated paddocks, carcasses of those that perished rotting on hillsides, and the willy-willies pulling up red dirt with ease. And then observe how landscapes changed, with floods triggering dormant seeds to sprout and watering native grasses and invasive species all back to unruly life. The return of water transformed the view from the van window to verdant life. There was so much I did not understand, and see, as a white girl who was just beginning to travel in the world.

What you notice reflects what you value. Iconic images of the dry interior capture the desolation and desperation of Country without rain. We can read how landscapes suffer in over-extractive regimes in works such as *Drought*, 1959, by Dacre Stubbs, held in the NGV Collection. The photograph foregrounds the bleached bones of a long dead bovine and centres a compromised wood-and-wire fence. A windmill dominates the horizon and has apparently failed at its task of pumping sufficient water to ward off drought, while the sun-tipped clouds scudding across the sky mirror the white of the desiccated bovine bones. Those clouds could suggest hope of rain but having lived through drought cycles in rural Australia I've learnt to not assume that precipitation necessarily arrives with that sort of sky cover. Rather, I see this monochrome landscape as offering recognition that transformation is necessary, and long overdue, even then in late-1950s.

Perceptions of environments are contingent on multiple tangible and intangible factors that shape how we sense worlds. The same place can mean different things to different individuals and communities, as social and cultural forces construct environments just as much as physical realities, including flood/drought cycles. Writers, artists, academics and activists who grapple with questions of place, care and values keep returning to how this diversity emerges and what it means for the worlds we make and that make us. For instance, Val Plumwood, writing in the *Australian Humanities Review* (2008), asks for a politics of place that is both social and ecological, and invites us to value not only those places we identify as special and aesthetically beautiful but also places 'that we don't have to know about but whose degradation we as commodity consumers are indirectly responsible for'. Calling them 'shadow places', Plumwood wrote about the frequently distant and/or marginalised places and peoples that are sacrificed and exploited for rapacious consumption in the 'Global North' (a term used to describe how, on the global scale, relatively richer countries tend to be located in the Northern Hemisphere, except Australia and New Zealand). These places are shadowed as people in richer countries don't want, or need, to know about them: privilege shields the wealthy from full responsibility for how things are made while remote landscapes and communities bear the costs of unfair commodity regimes. Plumwood argued that we should shine a light on these shadowed places and be accountable for the uneven experiences produced by global capital.

Shadow waters exist in similar ways to shadow places. A recent paper I co-wrote with Aleshia Lonsdale, a Wiradjuri artist and weaver, and academics Laura Hammersley, Emily O'Gorman and Fiona Miller, details how shadow waters are formed in and around Mudgee. Shadow waters takes the idea of shadow places and applies it to geographies of water to explain how some water bodies are privileged while others are marginalised in resource decision-making. Shadow waters emerge over time and in place and space. Groundwater is frequently shadowed as it is less visible than surface flows while Indigenous water values are historicised or minimised by formal governance processes. A form of 'Aqua Nullius' dominates so much of water management in Australia, according to Indigenous academic Virginia Marshall, as Indigenous water knowledges are overlooked and ignored. Aqua nullius is made possible by rendering invisible Indigenous water knowledges, a form of shadowing.

Shadows are, however, contingent as they form with the commingling of light and objects. Shadows can be cast and hide important truths, yet they can also protect and nurture, shield from harsh sunlight and provide refuge. The dark can be a place of comfort and relief. Places that are important and treasured can gain security by the cover of shadows, and environments can heal if metaphorically kept out of the light. It follows, then, that not everyone perceives water bodies in the same way; what may be thought of as shadow waters for one person or community may be a valued water place to others. For instance, the Cudgegong River – a sub-catchment of the Murray-Darling basin – in Mudgee holds high esteem among some non-Indigenous local people, while its ill health is evident to Aboriginal people and environmentalists. The perception of a trashed Cudgegong is due to regulating dams, overuse of pesticides and fertilisers, and the lack of significant flow to regularly flush the river out. The new walkway that meanders around its banks with manicured parkland, however, attracts many people and their animals for daily walks and bike rides.

Meanwhile, the Goulburn River that flows down the other side of the Great

Dividing Range and into the Hunter River before reaching the sea at Newcastle, is a part of a treasured songline for Wiradjuri people and an important meeting place. Coal mining activities, current and proposed, are compromising this important river. As a local traditional owner who speaks for Country, including the Goulburn River, attests:

> …water is life. Water is woman. It's everything. It's about creation and where the tributaries come from and the flows and their tributaries and the connections between the landscapes from one to the other. It's water and it's life. Meeting places to trade…

Water is fundamental to existence and being in and with Country. To this woman, water is more than a resource to allow for coal extraction or to facilitate irrigation. Quite differently, a local landowner and wine producer viewed unknown groundwater as a useful, if troublesome, future resource in a 2015 interview:

> What we haven't done is groundwater, it's too tricky and a wonderful way to study groundwater would be to do coal seam gas at the same time. It's the next big answer.

The conjoining of groundwater science with coal seam gas extraction is typical of Western orientations to resource management. Frontier expansionism seeps in to this perspective on shadow waters and the unknown is refigured as an opportunity for further carbon emissions and revenue generation.

Different people read the same landscapes in multiple ways, reflecting diverging social, cultural and environmental values in the process. One important place on the Goulburn River is The Drip, a significant place for Wiradjuri people that percolates water into the river below. While the beautiful sandstone cliff face hugs the Goulburn and provides a welcome spot to rest at the end of a riverine walk, it is a special Wiradjuri place for women that not everyone should visit. Country needs constant tending to and caring for, especially when there are forces that are reducing the health of Country, and healing must happen if places are overused. The following conversation that I had with Wiradjuri women around Mudgee captures how views of water places directly affects their community:

> Tara: And a lot of the women's sites, groundwater is sacred to them as well and even some of the women's business is to do with groundwater as well and caretaking of that.
>
> Jess: So how does that work?
>
> Sam: They reckon they don't affect it … mines don't affect it; what are you talking about? So it's really hard getting them to understand that it might be under the ground and it might be just water to you but it affects people and community. When the rivers get sick we get sick people and [this affects] their ability to pass on knowledge and enjoy those places. Even though they are going to do all this stuff with The Drip, in the back of your mind you think well what is it going to be like in 10 or 15 years' time? Is it going to be that overrun with people that it takes away from it? I know that they want to fix it up so more people can enjoy it, but then you think, well how far does that go?

The (in)visibility of water that flows underground does not lessen its importance for Wiradjuri women. While the farmer viewed groundwater as a new frontier, Indigenous women are cognisant of the interplay between different bodies of water and want to maintain the integrity of these relationships.

‘Perceptions of environments are contingent on multiple tangible and intangible factors that shape how we sense worlds.’

——— JESSICA McLEAN

The Drip is a place layered with meanings and readings. Brett Whiteley famously frolicked in the Goulburn upstream of The Drip in 1970, leaving his own painted marks on the sandstone walls of the river. The artwork became part of the justification for extending Goulburn National Park to The Drip in the lead up to the 2015 New South Wales election. It is only in the past ten years that Whiteley's art near The Drip has gained prominence and, prior to this, his white outlined images were sometimes mistaken as Wiradjuri art. Wendy Whiteley, his wife, was camping with Brett and their child at the time and said in 2009 that Brett spontaneously painted the piece after being inspired by Indigenous people: ‘He made the drawings as a homage to the fact Aboriginals did amazing cave paintings at other places.’

Artists are adept at reflecting on discourses of inclusion and exclusion, pushing their audiences to reflect on their assumptions of absence and presence, the acknowledged and invisible in urban and rural landscapes. Aleshia Lonsdale, the Wiradjuri artist I mentioned earlier, has produced pieces that work at these edges, inspired by her lived experience of growing up in heavily settled rural Australia. For example, her *Recognize* artwork is a piece of street art in New York that combines the ‘ALWAYS WAS ALWAYS WILL BE ABORIGINAL LAND’ political statement with the Native American medicine wheel. The yellow stencil on red and black burnished brickwork is ‘an attempt to bring to people's consciousness the presence of First Nations people in New York City and their connection to their land.’

Landscapes continue to be rewritten by people like Lonsdale who refuse to accept that there is no alternative to the status quo.

Connections to land and waters

can be tenuous in places like Australia where settler colonial mentalities still hold power. Bruce Pascoe writes in *Dark Emu* that ‘We are terrified of fire’, following devastating landscape-transforming events like Black Saturday in 2009. The fear we have of bushfires has come from experiencing landscapes that are radically changed as a result of colonial resource management fire regimes. These regimes have arisen from settler colonial efforts that overwrite pre-existing burning practices. We can see the fear of fire in John Longstaff's

‘Landscapes continue to be rewritten by people who refuse to accept that there is no alternative to the status quo.’

——— JESSICA McLEAN

Gippsland, Sunday Night, February 20th, 1898, depicting the chaos of the Great Gippsland Fires that killed twelve people and burnt about 260,000 hectares. Longstaff’s work centres a man on a horse, half-turning to assess what is behind him, or possibly warning his more distant friend to hurry on, while moving towards two women, one of whom holds a baby and stands with an older child, positioned at the edge of the frame. A vivid orange-red wall of flame lines the horizon and the strength of the fire dominates the trees it is moving towards. The older child seems to be tugging the arm of their mother and urging them all to move on – they are afraid. Indigenous burning practices stand in contrast to this fraught scenario. Pascoe explains in *Dark Emu* how fire was used as a way to nurture Country, ‘with a mosaic pattern of low-level burns’ to avoid the devastation of massive bushfires.

I was taught at school that the early colonising artists of what would eventually become Australia had failed to see the nuance of that landscape and had transplanted their remembered visions of their mother country on to the landscapes before them; effectively, the watercolour-rendered wide-open plains were imaginings inspired by their distant homes. A key artist of early colonial times was landscape painter Conrad Martens, and his *Pass above Wiseman’s Ferry, Hawkesbury River*, 1839, held in the NGV Collection, which shows a landscape with trees lining ridges and grassy plains. Space, light and fey can be seen in his landscape. My high school art teacher narrated that this was a flawed, romantic view and that the land was much more densely vegetated with sclerophyll all round. More like the patches of Wollemi National Park than the cliched and manicured rolling hills of England’s Lake District, the art teacher attested. That teacher’s view, however, was just another layer in the palimpsest of Australia’s reading of itself, folding back over representations that probably weren’t as skewed as once thought. Bill Gammage shares in his book *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) how the landscapes that greeted settler colonialists were well managed by fire. Country was cleansed and cared for with fire. The capacity to use fire as an agent for care, to nurture and nourish, came through passing down knowledge at the right time and to the right people, as the nuances of where, when, how much and for how long to burn were crucial in this cultural practice. Gammage and Pascoe argue that Indigenous fire regimes made for different landscapes than those we see now, and arose from noticing and nurturing Country. There are efforts to rebuild Indigenous cultural burning practices around Australia and this may contribute to healing these damaged places. Perhaps even fear could be displaced when recognition of Indigenous fire knowledge is strong and flourishing landscapes go on.

The boom and bust patterns in Australia’s climatic cycles are changing. While Indigenous Australians have long been successful in living with these unpredictable shifts, settler colonial farmers and pastoralists have fought against these patterns. Applying their imported notions of agriculture, settler colonialists resisted inevitable cycles of dry and wet times in Australia and adopted an engineering perspective to remake landscapes into channelled and measurable rivers. Meandering rivers that once flooded out to wetlands were redirected and controlled by impoundments, of varying scale and intent, from weirs in township areas to provide swimming pools, to dams for irrigation and water security.

Such visions of control and conquer persist today in Australian water management. In 2018, the Federal Government led a National Drought Summit, searching desperately for ways to ‘drought-proof’ Australia. The ‘Future Drought Fund’ announced at this summit was slated to pay for more water infrastructure, like dams, as if this may insulate unsustainable agro-industrial systems from the realities of changing climate. We even have a ‘drought envoy’, Barnaby Joyce, who makes loud and frequent calls for more dams, all around this continent. The modernist thinking that undergirds efforts to secure Australia from drought

are laid bare at these crucial moments. The misplaced faith in science and technology to solve a problem produced by over-consumption and, now, global environmental change, arises with perceived mastery of the environment. The multiple landscapes we live in and with, are glimpsed as deficient in these narratives, needing more technical interventions to render them familiar and hospitable. But it is foolish to believe that more landscape engineering will change the fraught ways in which agro-industrial systems keep pushing environments to collapse.

The gaps between perception and multiple realities is a key theme in a course I teach at Macquarie University called Rethinking Resource Management. This course asks students to think again about resource management, starting with how we perceive resources and ending with how we might do *better* resource management. Using local, international and global case studies, many drawing on the experiences of Indigenous peoples, this course offers students new ways of seeing resource management systems, new ways of thinking about the geopolitics of resources, and a range of practical skills and applied examples. To illuminate how we all see things differently, in one activity students analyse classic visual tricks like the older woman/younger woman image and more recent ones like the blue/green or gold/white dress. Every year, different students perceive the same stimulus in contrasting ways and we talk through what some of them are not seeing on first look to help reveal the other representation, a present image that initially hides from view thanks to our different ways of seeing. From here, we move to consider how knowledge is socially constructed, based on multiple perspectives, and that environmentally and socially just outcomes can only be achieved with careful incorporation of this diversity.

In Rethinking Resource Management, I have asked students to look at their own ways of thinking, seeing, doing and being. Many students who take this course will go on to be teachers, urban and rural planners, resource and environmental managers, environmental consultants, conservation and sustainability officers, and innumerable other jobs and roles in society. The decisions that these students will be empowered to make every day in their working lives will affect how others see and experience the world around them. Teaching students to not always trust what is seemingly self-evident, to second-guess what passes for common sense, to consider and look again, and once again, if they can, has been a necessary challenge. I hope that these students may take their different ways of seeing to the institutions that they will find work in, from the public to the private, as these are increasingly neoliberalised, and could benefit from more advocates for diverse views.

I now drive to Mudgee with my ten-year-old, over the Blue Mountains and down to the Central Tablelands, with digital devices firmly in tow. But I’m also asking him to look out to the horizon, to notice the different landscapes that emerge at wetter or drier times and observe the valleys in their dry grey-brown times, smell the land and waters that we move through and spend time with. I want him to understand the multiplicity that makes these places valuable, in their shadow and light, and to care for the futures of these landscapes as he comes to know them.

JESSICA McLEAN IS A GEOGRAPHER AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY. THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE MAY–JUN 2019 ISSUE OF *NGV MAGAZINE*.

John Longstaff *Gippsland, Sunday night, February 20th, 1898* 1898. Purchased, 1898

REBELS:

The Life-changing Women's Movement Behind a Prison Medal

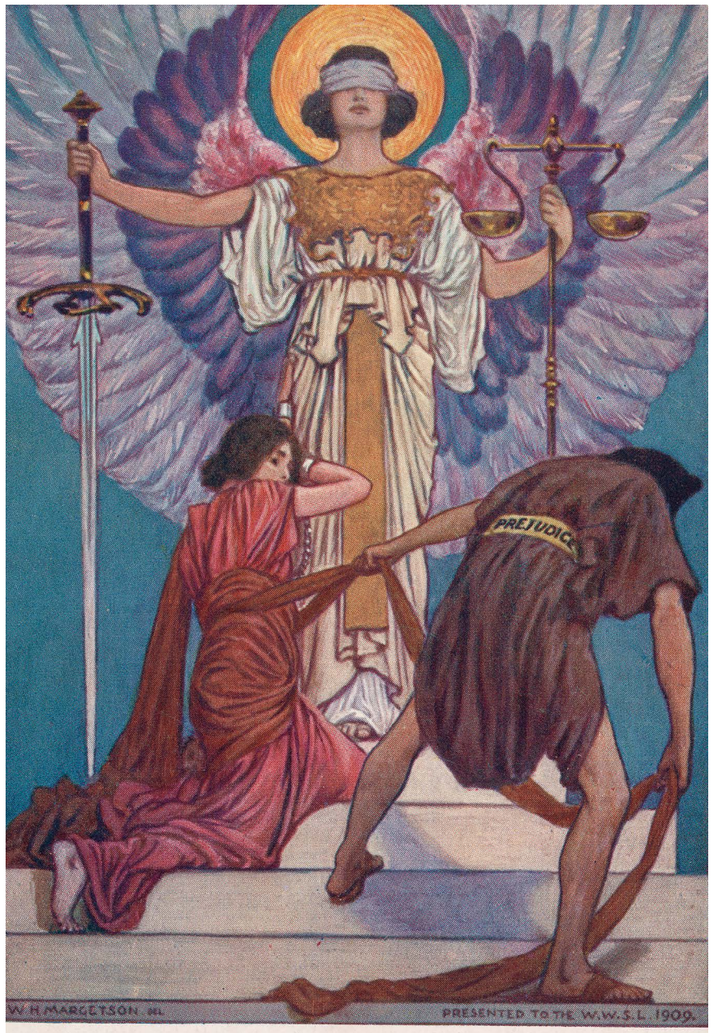
Through a range of works in the NGV Collection connected to women's suffrage, the acquisition of which has been made possible through the generous support of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and the Campbell-Pretty Family, we investigate the events and people behind one of the biggest global activist movements.

BY DR MARIA QUIRK

In the early hours of Monday 10 June 1913, Clara Giveen, a 26-year-old woman of 'independent means', and Kitty Marion, a music-hall actress, were spotted on Kew Road in the genteel west London suburb of Richmond by a passing police constable. The constable questioned the pair on their reasons for being out so late. 'I am an artist', Kitty replied, 'and often keep late hours'. Following Clara and Kitty to a semi-detached Edwardian townhouse on West Park Road, the constable called for backup. Both women were known to police as militant suffragettes. Earlier that morning, several fires had been deliberately lit in the surrounding district, including one at Hurst Park Racecourse, where the suffrage campaigner Emily Wilding Davison had been trampled to death by the king's horse just hours before. Suspecting Clara and Kitty's involvement in the crime, police entered the West Park Road house to find Clara lying in bed, fully dressed, and reading a copy of Suffragette magazine. Both women were arrested for loitering with intent to commit a crime. A day later, they were charged with arson.

Clara Giveen joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), Emmeline Pankhurst's militant suffrage organisation, in November 1910. She was described by Kitty as a 'beautiful blonde' from a good family, who was inspired to join the WSPU after witnessing the events of Black Friday – a suffrage march on the Houses of Parliament during which women were subject to brutal police violence. Historian Fern Riddell speculates that Clara joined Kitty in a WSPU sub-group named The Hot Young Things. Founded in 1907, The Hot Young Things was made up of unmarried suffragettes willing to undertake 'danger duty' – extreme militant action. If true, this suggests that Clara was among the most radical and aggressive of all suffragettes active in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Clara had already been arrested three times by the night of the Hurst Park fire. In late 1910, she was one of 160 women arrested during a suffragette demonstration, but was



discharged without trial. A year later, in November 1911, Clara served five days in prison for breaking the windows of a local government office. Just a few months after being released, Clara took part in another window-smashing campaign, this time on Regent Street, and received a four-month sentence at Winson Green prison in Birmingham. Winson Green was one of the first prisons to perform forcible feeding on suffragettes like Clara, who undertook hunger strikes while incarcerated. Clara was weak when she was released from the prison in mid 1912.

Just over twelve months later, Clara and Kitty were back in court on trial for setting fire to the Hurst Park Racecourse grandstand, causing damage valued at an estimated £13,000. Dubbed by the papers as the 'female fire friends', both women were found guilty and sentenced to three years penal servitude. When the judge pronounced the verdict, suffragettes in the court gallery shouted the campaign's watchwords: 'No surrender!' They were ejected from the court singing the suffrage battle song, 'March On'. 'We have not had a fair trial', Clara declared. 'We have not been tried by our peers. Women never will receive justice until women as well as men are on juries'. The prisoners were taken to their cells shouting, 'We shall fight and we shall win!'

Sometime between serving her first prison sentence in 1911 and her final stay at Holloway Prison in 1913, Clara was awarded one of the highest honours bestowed by the suffrage campaign: a Holloway brooch. Wrought in silver and green, white and purple enamel, the Holloway brooch was designed by suffragette and artist Sylvia Pankhurst in 1909 in the shape of a portcullis, representing the House of Commons. Described in the WSPU newspaper as their 'Victoria Cross', Holloway brooches were proudly worn by their recipients as visible markers of their bravery and commitment, and as a means to inspire others to similar personal sacrifice. A public, visual representation of suffragettes' courage, the Holloway brooch was an important part of the suffrage campaign's strategy to embed themselves into the nation's public consciousness and visual culture.

The women's suffrage movement in the United

Kingdom was not just a momentous event in political history; it was also a turning point in the history of popular design, propaganda and dress. From the mid nineteenth century until 1928, when universal female suffrage was granted, numerous suffrage societies were established to campaign for women's right to vote using both peaceful and militaristic tactics. Designers and artists played an important role is popularising and disseminating the suffrage message. They designed and produced jewellery, accessories, ceramics, banners, printed ephemera and other artistic products, using distinct colour schemes, logos and graphics to raise awareness of the cause and build their political advantage. In doing so, suffrage designers created the first modern, 'branded' political campaign of the visual age.

Mary Lowndes, founder of the Artists' Suffrage League, declared, 'Who takes the eye takes all'. Visual images defined the suffrage movement, from the purple, green and white sashes worn by the WSPU, to the 'Votes for Women' posters designed by Hilda Dallas and distributed in their thousands around London and beyond. Suffrage organisations drew on the talents of a new generation of women artists and designers who had benefited from the opening up of art education to women in the late nineteenth century, and built on a long tradition of middle-class female fundraising and 'craftivism'. Capitalising on new technologies in printing and distribution, suffrage organisations developed one of the most distinctive and dynamic visual identities of the twentieth century.

The British suffrage campaign was a rare instance

where art and politics converged in a deliberate and strategic way. Art and design were not tangential to the campaign; they were central to it. The beginnings of the suffrage movement in the nineteenth century coincided with a wave of collective agitation from women artists, who campaigned for access to life study and entry into established art societies and schools. For artists like Barbara Bodichon, Emily Mary Osborn and Anna Mary Howitt, petitioning for women's access to the Royal Academy art schools went hand in hand with the fight for the vote, women's legal reform and property rights. Among this close-knit network of feminist artists, a culture of 'matronage' emerged; Bodichon, Howitt and others painted portraits of each other and other feminists that visually represented their courage, ambition and intellect. Portraiture that blended the personal with the political remained an important part of the suffrage movement's visual culture and messaging into twentieth century.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, high-profile professional artists such as Louise Jopling, Annie Swynnerton and Susan Isabel Dacre took an active role in the suffrage campaign, supporting the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (acronym NUWSS, a non-militant organisation led by Millicent Fawcett), the Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage and other proto-feminist causes such as the dress reform movement. Of the 2000 signatories of the 1889 Declaration in Favour of Women's Suffrage, almost 100 came from women artists. Women's art societies in London and around the country were meeting places for suffragists, and also promoted women's professional advancement through art classes and exhibition spaces. When the campaign for women's suffrage accelerated in the first years of the twentieth century, it was no surprise that artists became key players.

A turning point in the relationship between artists and the suffrage movement came with the founding of the Artists' Suffrage League and the Suffrage Atelier, organisations that merged artistic, political and professional interests. Founded by Arts and Crafts stained-glass artist Mary Lowndes in 1907, the Artists' Suffrage League aimed to 'further the cause of women's enfranchisement ... by bringing in an attractive manner before the public eye the long-continued demand for the vote'. The League, made up of professional artists, worked with the NUWSS. Some of their earliest products were displayed at the NUWSS procession of June 1908, during which 10,000 people marched on parliament to demonstrate their determination for the vote to the newly instated prime minister, Herbert Asquith. The League designed and made eighty embroidered banners for the march, which constituted the 'most beautiful art exhibition of the year'.

The choice of medium was no accident. Political marches were antithetical to conventional standards and expectations of female behaviour.

'Sometime between serving her first prison sentence in 1911 and her final stay at Holloway Prison in 1913, Clara was awarded one of the highest honours bestowed by the suffrage campaign: a Holloway brooch.'

— MARIA QUIRK

One of the key goals of the procession – and of the NUWSS more broadly – was to demonstrate the dignity and 'womanliness' of the suffrage campaign, as a means to prove that they 'deserved' enfranchisement. The well-organised, orderly and beautifully outfitted marchers were a firm riposte to anti-suffragists' claims that the movement was hysterical, shrieking and crazed. Embroidery was the art form most closely associated with traditional definitions of femininity and with the private sphere of the home. By harnessing a medium that epitomised women's domesticity and using it for political ends, the Artists' Suffrage League helped forge a new visual language of femininity, and define a new role for women in society. Creating embroidered banners was time-consuming compared to making placards or signs, but Mary Lowndes was convinced that their association with religious processions and noble

revolutions would spark bystanders' fervour and loyalty. She explained to *The Englishwoman* magazine, 'A banner is a thing to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to flirt its colours for your pleasure, to half show and half conceal a device you long to unravel: you do not want to read it, you want to worship it'.

The symbolism of the League's embroidered banners was not lost on the press of the day. James Douglas of the *Morning Leader* declared that the procession was 'more stately and more splendid and more beautiful than any procession I ever saw. When men march ... they carry huge banners with ugly paintings ... the colours are violently crude ... [the women] have revived the pomp and glory of the procession. They have recreated the beauty of blown silk and tossing embroidery'. *The Daily News* reported that the women's 'bravery, their admirable organisation and their skilful use of beautiful and decorative banners, impressed a crowd which obviously came prepared to laugh'.

Just days after the NUWSS Arts and Crafts–inspired banners captured the public's imagination, an even larger suffrage march defined the 'suffrage look' for years to come. The Women's Social and Political Union had broken away from the NUWSS in 1903. Tightly controlled by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, the WSPU advocated for direct action and civil disobedience. Their members were pejoratively deemed 'suffragettes' in 1906, a term the WSPU claimed as their own, and which came to denote their militancy. It was the WSPU's treasurer, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who recognised the importance of colour, symbols and iconography to mainstreaming the suffrage cause. In the lead-up to the June 1908 'Women's Sunday' rally, Pethick-Lawrence selected the colours white (for purity), purple (for royalty, freedom and dignity) and green (for hope) to represent the WSPU. Writing of the colour scheme in the WSPU's weekly newspaper Votes for Women, Pethick-Lawrence declared:

> You may think that this is a small and trivial matter. But there is no action and no service that can be considered as small or trivial in this movement. I wish I could impress on every mind as deeply as I feel myself the importance of popularising the colours in every way open to us. If every individual woman in this union would do her part, the colours would become the reigning fashion. And strange as it may seem, nothing would so help to popularise the Women's Social and Political Union.

Pethick-Lawrence rightly believed that the WSPU colours would become synonymous with the suffrage cause and make suffragettes immediately identifiable to onlookers. Participants in the 1908 rally were instructed to wear a pale or white dress, a sash in white, purple and green, and purple and green accessories. The effect was remarkable. Heeding Pethick-Lawrence's advice that 'the effect will be very much lost unless the colours are carried out in the dress of every woman', the 300,000 marchers formed an 'extraordinary scene'. *The Times* reported: 'Each group marched under a banner of its own and each woman walking in the procession wore the purple, white and green either in the favours pinned to the breast, or in the trimmings of the hat, in belt ribbons or in shoulder sashes; many of the ladies wore costumes designed in an arrangement of purple, white and green'.

As art historian Lisa Tickner explains, the genius of the WSPU colours was the universality of their application. Following the branding triumph of Women's Sunday, anything rendered in purple, white and green became a symbol of suffrage advocacy. Prime minister Herbert Asquith remained unmoved by the suffrage campaign, but retailers quickly recognised the potential profitability of the suffrage brand and the middle-class female dollar behind it. Within a month, businesses ranging from Selfridges and Liberty to florists and button-makers were advertising their branded wares to suffrage supporters. There was tricolour underwear and corsets, stockings and garters, suffrage-branded tea, and boots made for 'suffragette wear'. The WSPU was keen for its supporters to patronise these companies and a regular column on fashion appeared in the WSPU newspaper Votes for Women, which endorsed specific purveyors who advertised in their pages. There was no concern about mixing politics, fashion and consumerism. 'All good suffragists must realise that in giving their custom to the suffragists advertising in *Votes for Women* they are very materially helping the cause'. Fine jewellery from designers such as Mappin & Webb made the colours even more desirable, and reinforced that suffrage women valued elegance and femininity. Long before today's era of feminist T-shirts designed by the likes of by Maria Grazia-Chuiri for Dior, the WSPU made the suffrage cause fashionable.

The success of the WSPU's visual identity was due in part to the fact that it had an artist as one of its leaders. Sylvia Pankhurst's twin passions were art and the rights of working women. Influenced by the work of William Morris and Walter Crane as a child, Pankhurst won a studentship to the Manchester School of Art and then a scholarship at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in 1904. Her interest in women's equality permeated her artistic studies. Noting that the distribution of scholarships at the RCA was weighted towards male students, she persuaded the Labour politician Keir Hardie to raise the issue in parliament. The answer was unsatisfactory – three out of sixteen scholarships were allocated to women and the school would not consider any change – but the inequalities Pankhurst witnessed led to a lifelong interest in the welfare of young artists.

As her mother and sister intensified their campaigning, Pankhurst felt torn between her career as an artist and her vocation as an activist. 'The idea of giving up the artist's life', she wrote, 'laying aside the beloved pigments and brushes, to wear out one's life on the platform and the chair at the street corner was a prospect too tragically grey and barren to endure'. On the other hand, Pankhurst's belief in socialist and collectivist ideals made a career creating art for the wealthy middle classes unappealing. In 1906, Pankhurst devoted herself full time to the suffrage cause. She largely abandoned the representational social realism that had characterised her art to that point, and embraced artistic labour as a vehicle of political change.

Among Pankhurst's earliest and most enduring contributions to the suffrage movement was its logo, 'the angel of freedom'. Conceived in 1908, the design may have been inspired by her travels in Venice, where she had spent two years studying Renaissance frescoes. Standing on tiptoe, Pankhurst's winged angel sounds a curved trumpet and unfurls a banner reading 'freedom', heralding the dawn of a new era. In the background sit prison bars and the WPSU letters, wrapped in flowers and prison chains. A symbolic representation of the WSPU's ideals, the angel of freedom became a ubiquitous feature on suffrage merchandise over the following few years. It was reproduced on the cover of the inaugural issue of *Votes for Women*, pressed onto tin badges and featured on a commemorative thirteen-piece tea service, commissioned to sell at the 1909 Women's Exhibition. Once again, the suffrage campaign melded traditional symbols of feminine domesticity with a radical political agenda; one of the WSPU banners Sylvia designed featured the provocative slogan, 'rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God'.

When Sylvia Pankhurst designed the Holloway brooch in 1909, she was drawing on personal experience. She was sent to jail for the first time in late 1906. As the WSPU grew more militant in the following years, Sylvia was imprisoned and subjected to force-feeding on several occasions, until she left the WSPU to pursue more peaceful tactics in 1913. The Holloway brooch and the Hunger Strike Medal, also introduced in 1909, were modelled on traditional military honours. Many prominent suffragettes, including Emmeline Pankhurst, wore their brooches in official, widely distributed photographs. They were conceived as a reward for recipients' bravery and loyalty, but they were also meant as a public symbol of women's endurance. The medals, along with many other aspects of the suffrage campaign, were not just designed to win the vote; they were designed to change the conversation about women.

What did the suffrage movement achieve?

The eventual granting of women's right to vote in England in 1918 and 1928 was not a neat conclusion or culmination of their campaign; it was linked instead to women's contribution in the First World War. Where the suffrage movement really effected change was in broadening the ideological and discursive meaning of 'woman' as an identity. By using art and design to create a strongly defined visual aesthetic for both themselves and their campaign, suffragists and suffragettes did not just cause a political spectacle, they made a spectacle out of themselves. In doing so, they moved women – and the idea of 'womanly' behaviour – decisively into the modern era, a time when many different definitions and representations of femininity could co-exist at once. Their brand was daringly conceived, brilliantly stage-managed and strategically crafted to achieve its dreamed-for outcome: a new, glorious dawn of thundering freedoms.

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(previous) **W. H. Margetson (designer), Women Writers' Suffrage League, London (publisher)** *Women Writers' Suffrage League Postcard* 1909 (detail). Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and the Campbell-Pretty Family, 2019
(above) **Women's Social and Political Union, London (manufacturer), Toye & Co., London (maker)** *Medal for Valour awarded to Grace Chappalow* 1909. Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and the Campbell-Pretty Family, 2019

A Silent and Invisible Conversation

'Prose, as it is absorbed and internalised by a reader, is surprisingly similar to visual art.' In this meditation on the close relationship between art and audience; book and reader, author Cate Kennedy plays in the infinitely open spaces where the page, the prose, the frame or the form ends, and encounters magic and transformation.

BY CATE KENNEDY

When I was in my early twenties, like so many Australians, I did some extended travelling in Europe. I didn't take a camera; instead I collected hundreds of postcards of paintings and artworks I loved in the many galleries I visited. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit – in these days of rigorous Marie Kondo decluttering – that I still have several hundred of them, stacked in an old suitcase, ready to be drawn out at random and studied again some day. I still have many of my childhood books, too – complete with my loopy seven-year-old signature, and I can see where I've laboriously traced images, or copied hands and faces, from the illustrations I pored over for hours. After long years of upping stakes and moving house, these postcards and books are solid companions now, and I'm not going to be throwing them away as clutter. Like all artefacts, they're charged with something ineffable and hard to articulate, to do with use and memory and meaning.

I picked up a copy of the book not long ago which had been my very first 'reader' at school. The moment I turned to the first page it was like swinging open a vault. I experienced that strange, vertiginous sensation that swamps us when we touch an artefact that has become deeply inscribed in our early memory. Fifty years ago (!) I was checked off on a roll and told to sit down at a tiny desk, where I would learn to read. Miss Cresp, who taught prep at Laverton Primary School that year, handed me this same book, published by the Department of Education in the early 1950s. The Department sure got their money's worth out of those books, since they were still in general use in the early 1970s, which means two generations of Australian schoolkids learned to read with them.

If you were in primary school during those decades, you will no doubt recall the 'Playmates' series and the spookily well-behaved John and Betty (*'John is big. He can help father. He can dig with his spade. Betty is big, too. She can help mother. She can water the garden with her little can'*) their pets Fluff and Scottie, and their robotically polite little friends Peter and Ann. (*'Betty likes to play with Ann. 'Let us skip,' says Betty. John likes to play with Peter. 'Let us have a slide,' says John. 'Up you go, Peter. I can slide after you.' 'Let us go for a walk,' says John. 'Yes,' says Peter. They go to the pond to see the ducks. 'Let us feed the ducks with my bun,' says John. 'This is fun,' says Peter. 'Yes,' says John.*)

The moment I re-read these lines, every year that has passed in my life since the age of five slips away, and I am transported back to that classroom, with Miss Cresp in her miniskirt, paging through this worn Scotch-taped book, spelling out those phrases. The room smells of chalk and sandwiches in vinyl schoolbags and cardboard Globite cases. Two kids who are always as obedient as John and Betty themselves – our 'monitors' – are studiously punching the foil tops in our recess milk bottles up the front of the classroom, and I am thinking that the kids in this book live on some other planet, where boys feed ducks buns instead of lobbing bits of brick at them, where they address each other saying 'let us' instead of 'jawanna' (as in 'jawanna go on the slide?'), where Betty has a pram and a doll and John has a drum and a truck, and they play nicely with Baby.

I haven't told Miss Cresp, but I've already taught myself to read, too impatient to understand how those marks on the page became sounds and stories to wait. I power through John and Betty in five minutes. But she doesn't care. She tells me – the first of many crushing announcements by teachers – that this will be my reader *for the rest of the term.*

Eternity stretches away before me in a wasteland of ducks, prams, skipping ropes and brown sandals. Something dutiful in me wants to believe there's more to this book than meets the eye, because an adult has given it to me and, after all, adults hold the keys to the kingdom. There must be some secret to absorb beyond this boring repetitive android chanting, I am thinking, and I'm looking for it, suspended in my own bookish daydream. On one page I suddenly notice that Betty's shadow,

as she pretends to be a bird, is actually a bird. 'John can hop!' declares the text, and, as he hops, his shadow is actually a rabbit's. Even at five years old, I'm so desperate to see the point of the exercise that this tiny, simple thing seems instantly elevated to the significance of a Zen koan. It's like the artist has drawn a visual gag just for me, a wink, a small private joke.

and intact as ever, full of their secret messages and hidden narratives I had wished, yearned and imagined into being. I recall exactly how it had felt to be seized with the idea, at five, that the author and the artist were giving me the equivalent of a secret handshake, that there was something to be found between the lines; a small secret reward for those looking beyond the surface.

'Underneath those words and images it was like an invisible, silent conversation was going on, built out of suggestive space, and a leap of faith.'

——— CATE KENNEDY

I gaze hard at the children on the orange cover – silhouettes of John and Betty with their dogs striding purposefully off in opposite directions. Where are they going? What is happening off the edge of the book? And what's going on between the borders of the pages, inside? What are the children pointing at, that I can't see?

Now, fifty years later, I am struck afresh with the dizzying sensation of sharp visceral recognition at this precise recalled moment of discovery. The illustrations leap out at me as fresh

Underneath those words and images it was as if an invisible, silent conversation was going on, built out of suggestive space, and a leap of faith. As an adult I've written across many genres – poetry, fiction, memoir, essay – but this desire is always the starting point: how to give someone else the jolt of surprise and recognition something has given me? What form is going to best serve this revelatory moment of connection, shared through the prism of language? What is our silent, invisible 'conversation' about?

Prose, as it is absorbed and internalised by a reader, is surprisingly similar to visual art. There is detail, and dimension, and a kind of careful scenic staging which is not always discernible via the casual scan but which rewards deep reading. Objects, settings and patterning are all put to use. Even the way prose is formatted on the page is designed to give the reader breathing space, to feel entirely immersed in the blow-by-blow trajectory of the narrative as it unfolds in an imagined temporal dimension.

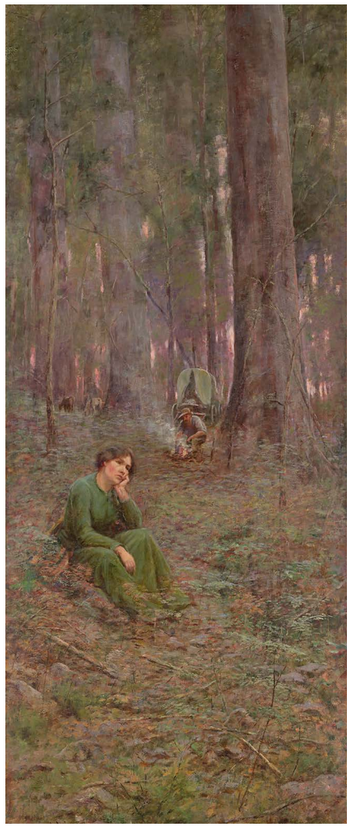
I often think about a story in terms of its parameters, and authorial decisions made about where those parameters are placed in order to create a dynamic emotional experience for the reader. I feel myself shaping a frame, directing and modulating a reader's attention. Inside that frame is everything they need, and everything outside it can be trimmed away, and left implicit.

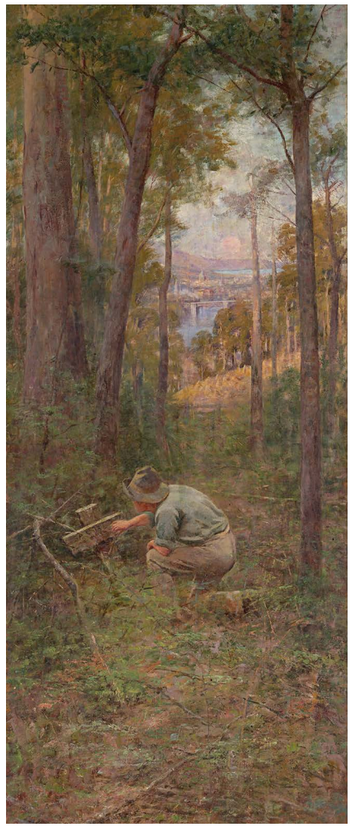
As a child, my family visited the city together rarely, although my mother brought me to Collins Street once in a while to have eye tests with an optometrist and be fitted with new, ever-uglier glasses. These visits generally involved having pupil-dilating eyedrops put in my eyes, so for a few hours after each optometrist visit I stumbled along behind my mother in a blurry world of painful overwhelming dazzle. Through this squinting glare I beheld my childhood Melbourne: the steep incline of Collins Street, the David Jones Food Hall, the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, the cenotaph and occasionally the National Gallery of Victoria itself on St Kilda Road.

Once my whole family visited the Gallery together. The memory of the day has stayed with me because we happened upon an exhibition which was, for me at seven or eight years old, transformative. The drawings in the show seemed diffident, even careless – big confident sketches in crayon, to my memory; faces rendered with the loosest and barest of strokes. Everything seemed to clear and solidify around my field of vision as I gazed at those drawings. They were by Pablo Picasso. I'd tried to draw faces, eyes,

hands and horses myself, so I knew how effortlessly, uncannily brilliant these were. I lingered, doing another circuit, marvelling.

Nobody else in my family seemed to find the drawings that interesting or arresting, though, and they got bored waiting for me out in the Gallery foyer, and came into the exhibition to find me, making a joke of it.





I was burning up with something as I came back out, something dilated and lit up and restless. How could they talk, now, about heading over to the floral clock, or buying an ice cream? Why was my dad concerned with getting back to the car to beat the traffic home? How could they possibly have failed to be mesmerised by *that*?

During those eye tests, my small head clenched into a big metal contraption, I'd been instructed to keep my gaze fixed on a series of small illuminated letters and icons as the optometrist fitted slides of different calibrations into the eyepieces, saying: 'Better now? Clearer? How about now? Clearer?' until suddenly the right combination was found, the correct lens slid into place, and everything sharpened at last into bright, clear blinking focus.

Stepping out into the Gallery foyer that day, I was aware of a similar sensation. The stained glass in the Leonard French ceiling was dazzlingly rich, the water coursing down the front windows created a whole new streaming abstract landscape of the world outside. Something had shifted in me, and it was something unexplainable to my parents and my sister; it was a secret, private realisation I nursed to myself.

On school excursions to the NGV after that, I was always dawdling, trying to break away from the group, hoping for a chance to gaze at paintings alone. I didn't want to comment on them, or write down my responses to comprehension questions on the excursion worksheets. I wanted to feel, again, that transfixing moment of silent communion with an artist, empty of judgement or even discernment. I'm sure you know the state of mind I'm talking about. It feels like a waking dream; someone else's dream they have dreamed for you which you are invited to step into; to imagine and infer what is under the surface, what is beyond the frame.

Frederick McCubbin's triptych *The pioneer*, 1904, was an artwork I always returned to during those excursions. It wasn't just the technical prowess of the painting – although McCubbin rendered eucalypt forests, light, leaf litter and smoke like nobody else – it was his device of creating a clear, nuanced narrative through the three works which appealed to me. There were no

explanatory notes to make this interpretative process didactic or reductive, just the three paintings, displayed with their internal storyline presented as visual snapshots, caught in time.

You don't so much view the triptych as fall into it. The forest is gradually cleared, the trees are felled and a house is built, a child is born and grows, the city emerges like a shimmering mirage on a distant horizon. The woman's face looks lost and despondent in the first panel, but we only have her erect, dignified posture and her husband's uptilted listening face to gauge her emotional state in the second. Within this suggestive space bloom our own internal stories and inferences and impressions. How are we able to step so effortlessly between the frames, and create this coherent narrative continuity out of what we are not being shown? Whose grave is it in the third frame, and who is the man kneeling by it? Is it the disheartened man from the artist's other work, *Down on his luck*, 1889 (Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth), or the adult son depicted as a baby in the second panel, tending or praying at the grave of one of his parents? Is it even the same place? It echoes the landscape and position of the grave in McCubbin's earlier painting *A bush burial*, 1890 (Geelong Gallery, Geelong). Is the man the original pioneer, and does the grave belong to the wife or the child?

In my experience, we don't stand empty before a work of art for long, especially not one where a narrative 'throughline' is signalled so deliberately. We can't help but try to intuit what is behind the intentional shape of the framed 'moments' the artist is showing us, and the more we enter this liminal, imagined space, the more memorable this narrative and its subtextual possibilities become to us.

The process of 'story-making' is participatory. It's exactly how good narrative prose works, too, as we immerse ourselves in the vivid dream of reading. *I'm showing you*, says the artist, *this, then this, and because of that, this*. A bird in a shadow of a child outstretched, pretending to fly, or a hand cupping a chin, a hand clinging to a mother's neck, a hand touching a bush grave. Beginning, middle and end, conception, growth and death. And we somehow care about these painterly representations on canvas, or invented characters summoned to the page, as though they are real people, humanised and honoured by the invisible connections and empathic re-visioning that we ourselves have provided. The transformation – its epiphany and emotional charge – becomes our own.

Look closely, says the artist as we gaze on what they have rendered. *Clearer? Clearer? How about this?*

'Within this suggestive space bloom our own internal stories and inferences and impressions. How are we able to step so effortlessly between the frames, and create this coherent narrative continuity out of what we are not being shown?'

——— CATE KENNEDY

CATE KENNEDY IS AN AUSTRALIAN NOVELIST, SHORT STORY AUTHOR, POET AND ESSAYIST. THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE SEP–OCT 2019 ISSUE OF *NGV MAGAZINE*.

FROM THE AUTHOR: MANY YEARS AFTER MY VISIT TO THE PICASSO EXHIBITION, I WROTE THIS POEM THINKING ABOUT THE WINDOW WE HAVE, AS CHILDREN, TO FEEL THE TRANSFORMATIVE JOLT OF ART, AND HOW IT NEVER REALLY LEAVES US. FROM *THE TASTE OF RIVER WATER: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS,* PUBLISHED BY SCRIBE PUBLICATIONS, 2011.

Frederick McCubbin
The pioneer (detail) 1904
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1906

Picasso's portrait of a young woman

BY CATE KENNEDY

A trip to the city. A family wanders past the floral clock
when a light rain
drives them inside the art gallery.

Her sister wants to look at the stained glass windows in the foyer
and run her fingers along the mesmerising water
streaming down the plate glass.
Her mother browses in the foyer shop for gift cards.
Desultory, they follow the crowds through the exhibit doors
filling in time until the weather clears.

In the first gallery they come across a retrospective of drawings
by Picasso, recently dead and deified,
the dizzying output of a loose, utterly confident pencil.
Her mother whispers to her father
that they hardly seem worth framing.
The child stares through the shifting bodies of milling adults
at Picasso's portrait of a young woman.

As her family makes a cursory circuit around the bulls and battles
she looks at the eyes, the two u-shapes making irises
the five eyelashes stalks of crayon, pure and precise,
the mouth swept in a bow in four strokes
the whole face a single flourish of careless joy.

Something closes in her throat, then opens.
A hand somewhere
sweeps a piercing, unerring line through her chest.

The rain has stopped.
Her sister and parents return, promising a visit to the donut van
before they go to the car.
As they walk out she cannot name the change, the dislocation.
It is as if the lozenges of light in those foyer windows
have been reassembled, the blood beats in her head
as though newly transfused, these people strangers
speaking a dulled and muffled language.

Those eyes under their winged brows, grave and perfect,
watch everything with their luminous compassion.
They have seen before what they see now;
a child, suddenly subdued,
something inside swept raw and newly secretive
judging now, silently
what must be kept hidden to survive;
the vigilant camouflage of thorn bushes
the grim survey lines of loneliness it will require.

New York City in the 1980s and 1990s

Through the eyes of L. A. Chandlar

New York City in the last two decades of the twentieth century was a city teetering on the edge of greatness and complete defeat. The art and music world was skyrocketing, but so too was crime, drugs and the AIDS epidemic. Just when the early 1990s couldn't get any worse, with the highest crime and homicide numbers of all time, and everything pointed to New York's absolute collapse … it didn't. In this Deep Read, New Yorker and author L. A. Chandlar shows us what New York City is made of and how art and culture has healed the city time and time again.

BY L. A. CHANDLAR

'Art has this other-worldly capacity to bring transformation and light – and when art is brought to public spaces for all to enjoy, its magic is experienced en masse, which can bring rehumanisation.'

I write experiential historical fiction, immersing readers in a particular time and letting them become friends with the characters. One of the themes I consistently focus on in my writing is beauty out of adversity. My *Art Deco Mystery* series takes place in the 1930s, telling the story of the lively and innovative spirit of the era that is often overshadowed by the Great Depression. Another period of New York's history I'm fascinated with is the 1980s and 1990s. New York in this period was on the brink of disaster; however, it was the art and culture of the time, I believe, that helped the growth and redemption of the city and the healing that followed.

New York City, throughout its long history, has always been thriving, loud and vivacious. Having lived in the city for almost twenty years, it's become my home and I am endlessly thrilled with its vitality and spontaneity. Over the decades, there have been times when the city came to the brink of disaster. When the infamous stock market crash of 1929 hit, by many reports, it was a day when the city went eerily silent. The sirens, the street chatter on every block, and the endless hammer blows and riveters from the massive city construction sites all stopped abruptly. It was like the city died that day, and it would take the builders and a firm love of the arts to resurrect it once again. The city has seen many almost ends where it seemed like it might collapse and then it just doesn't. The resilience and the beauty that came out of those times of desperation moved me, and that spirit is what compelled me to begin writing.

I saw New York City in one of these defining moments. I was supposed to be relocating to New York on 9/11, but of course that didn't happen. I did, however, move just two weeks later. I saw firsthand how the city thrived in the face of adversity. That infamous day was at the cusp of the end of one century and the beginning of the next. It was a bookend of the two previous decades, which all came into play to create a place where beauty had the capacity to shine – even when the city was in pain.

New York City has always dealt with change and upheaval in every era, but the 1980s and 1990s were a fascinating time where New York went right to the edge of irrevocable decrepitude. The two decades began with bankruptcy from the decade before. As Jess Nussbaum wrote in his article for *The New Yorker*, 16 October 2015:

> On October 16, 1975, New York City was deep in crisis. At 4 pm the next day, four hundred and fifty-three million dollars of the city's debts would come due, but there were only thirty-four million dollars on hand. If New York couldn't pay those debts, the city would officially become bankrupt.[1]

After intense meetings by city, state and national officials and then a refusal by President Gerald Ford to give any sort of bail out to the city of New York despite dire ramifications worldwide, the teachers union made a landmark decision to make up the city's shortfall with their pension funds to avert the immediate crisis. Ford's absolute refusal to help, sparking the damning headline that came out the following day by New York's *Daily News*: 'Ford to City:

Drop Dead', ended up galvanizing city leaders to make significant changes and tough choices that saved the city.

You take this era of tough choices and near bankruptcy, then the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and finally cap it off with the Y2K bug (a computer flaw that may have caused problems when processing dates beyond 31 December 1999), and then 9/11. The spirit of New York is not only capable of creating beauty out of ashes, but it longs to do so, through art, music and culture.

Many of the beautiful parts of current day New York had a very gritty beginning, almost forgotten now. 1980 began at an incredibly low point with the city falling into bankruptcy in the 1970s. Crime was escalating, with 250 felonies per week on the subway alone, and the murder rate peaked in 1990 at 2,245. With fiscal troubles, the police force was dwindling and while criminality increased, the city was unable to keep up with general maintenance. The parks were left to become barren wastelands and graffiti marked almost every wall, building and especially the subways, adding to the overall climate of corruption and disrepair.

Richie Narvaez, native New Yorker and author of the book *Hipster Death Rattle*, states:

> This decline was reflected in movies like *Taxi Driver, The Warriors, Escape from New York*, and *The Exterminator*. At the same time, the city's anger, tension, and frustration became a crucible for new art and new takes on art. So you get the artists like [Jean-Michel] Basquiat making the scene, you get a lot of wild performance art (Mondo New York, 1988). You get the rise of hip-hop and socially conscious rap music (for example, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five).[2]

The subway system in the 1980s was and still is a hot topic of artistic debate. Street art was on the rise and the subways were the main canvases. However, art had been mixed in with gang logos, trash and crime. The subway system was so crime-ridden, and laden with layers of ugly graffiti and trash, that the city came to a point where they almost shut it down. The Lexington Avenue train was commonly known at the 'Muggers' Express'. The city tried a few methods to save the system, including cleaning and painting the carriages weekly, but this only gave taggers a clean slate. They tried fencing in the carriages not in use, but people still found a way to sneak in. The city finally found a foolproof method to keep the carriages clean: they took advantage of New Yorkers' extreme annoyance to all things impedimentary. If a train carriage was found to have been tagged while in use, the subway employees would pull it out of service, even if it was in the midst of rush hour. As a New Yorker myself, I am left speechless at the genius of this plan. I cannot even fathom the riot-worthy angst that would have plagued the subway riders at that inconvenience.

When the city finally found a method that worked to keep the trains graffiti-free, I think it possibly accelerated the greatness of street art. Often, there's an assumption that limitation inhibits creativity. However, T.S. Eliot was known to have said, 'When forced to work within a strict framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom, the work is likely to sprawl'. One of the major obstacles with graffiti art was its link to vandalism and crime. However, artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Futura 2000 opened the art form to critical acclaim. Once the trains were no longer accessible to be painted with graffiti, other avenues had to be discovered to continue the art form.

Art has this other-worldly capacity to bring transformation and light – and when art is brought to public spaces for all to enjoy, its magic is experienced en masse, which can bring rehumanisation. A great example of this is Bryant Park, one of my favourite places in New York Located between Grand Central Station and Times Square, tucked in behind the main branch of the New York Public Library, the park is an absolute haven of art and colourful respites that tantalise all the senses, all year long. The wide lawn is a gathering place for movies in the summertime, plus live author events, mini Broadway performances, live piano playing and even juggling lessons. An old carousel evoking images of Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* spins on the south side with its tinkling music adding its own magic to the scene. Right next to it is an area where people can play family games together at little tables. The Southwest Cafe features an outdoor seating area with sparkling lights and porch swings for all-weather get-togethers and, in the cooler months, features fire pits to roast marshmallows and chestnuts under the stars. In late October, the Winter Village is set up for ice-skating, hundreds of art booths to shop, eateries and a large Christmas tree.

However, it wasn't this way in the 1980s. Fifty years previously, an elevated train had been erected along Sixth Avenue on the west side of the park, which put the park in shadow. An effort to protect the space was made by installing iron fences and hedges surrounding the park area. The effort backfired, making it a secretive haven for illicit behavior. By the 1990s, sex workers, drug dealers and the homeless were so prevalent, the park was given the nickname 'Needle Park'. A full renovation was completed in 1992, taking down all the hedges along the perimeter and filling it with art and light. Now, on any given day, you'll see hundreds of people enjoying the park, soaking up the beauty.

In the 1980s, Central Park was also a refuge for drugs and gang activity. The Great Lawn, which is now a lush, verdant place for thousands to picnic and play ball, was a barren field of worn-out scrub grass, garbage and graffiti. The park had fallen into disrepair. Crime was high and it was well known that it was a dangerous place to avoid, where possible. When the 840-acre park opened in 1878, it was considered one of the greatest achievements in urban landscaping. It would eventually become known as this again but, in the 1980s, graffiti marked most

monuments and walls, broken sidewalks and walkways pockmarked the terrain, and the trees and grass bore the marks of neglect. The gathering places that were once full of bright green grass and trees became dusty and dry with overuse and trash was more common than wildlife.

In 1980, the Central Park Conservancy began a massive and gradual overhaul that would bring life back to the park, led by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers as founding administrator first and then longest-serving president. With that renewal, crime began to lessen and art began its reign. At any given moment within the park, you could now hear the strains of violins being practised or jazz bands playing at certain high-traffic walkways, where all ages and cultures gather to enjoy the music. The summer *Shakespeare in the Park* series is so well attended that it's near impossible to go without waiting in line for several hours. *Philharmonic in the Park* and a multitude of other events make Central Park a living, breathing organism of creative endeavours. Painters and illustrators set up in grassy areas to use their skills to recreate, with their own prowess, the beautiful surroundings. Even in the dead of winter, one of my most treasured things to do is to go sledding on Cedar Hill in the late evening. When there's a snowstorm, we take our sleds to the Great Hill where the glittering buildings surround the park like sparkling giants. The lampposts lining the winding walkways seem to be right out of Narnia.

'Painters and illustrators set up in grassy areas to use their skills to recreate, with their own prowess, the beautiful surroundings.'

— L. A. CHANDLAR

In 1936, the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts opened. The 1930s' Mayor of New York, Fiorello LaGuardia, felt strongly that art could be a pathway for the healing and redemption of New York during the Depression. The school introduced scores of composers, actors, dancers, lyricists and musicians, who changed the world. It was no different during the 1980s and 1990s, with the school nurturing the careers of creatives in a wide range of fields including actors Jennifer Aniston and Al Pacino, dancer Desmond Richardson, singer and actor Ben Vereen, and fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. In the 1980s, the film and television series *Fame* was made about the school and the theme song for the movie was a constant backdrop in any household during this time. The film and series presented young, up-and-coming artists striving to become the best in their field in the face of the grit and reality of everyday life. The scenes with joyful dancing in the New York streets brought hope and the fun of art, music and dance.

In 1978, New York was almost dealt a lethal blow when a team of builders wanted to demolish Grand Central Station. The station desperately needed an overhaul, but to tear it down was unthinkable. At the time New York didn't have constructed historical landmark laws and it took Jackie Onassis, widow to John F. Kennedy, raising the concern with the Supreme Court in 1978 to save it. Then the entire

building but, most notably, the Main Concourse was refreshed and renovated to its original glory. The ceiling had been a dark, smutty grey and was cleaned to its original vibrant mint green, with the painted constellations and their pinpoints of light from a 1945 mural revealed. There remains a small rectangle of dark grey in a corner to show what it had looked like previously. The dingy colour was from decades of tobacco build-up from smokers walking through and their millions upon millions of cigarettes.

'The 1990s had its own wildly coloured, fantastically unique persona, beginning the decade even worse than the ones prior but ending on a completely unexpected high note.'

— L. A. CHANDLAR

The 1980s also brought in new sexual freedom and expression, but along with it came cocaine and the AIDS epidemic. Within that tumultuous time, the city was rife with music and art. Despite the music recording industry leaving the city, which was a primary factor of the bankruptcy in the 1970s, New York has always had a soul for music. In the 1980s and 1990s, the punk rock scene was thriving at the music venue CBGB, the nightclub Knitting Factory and the iconic Danceteria, known for launching Madonna's career. This was the golden age of New York clubbing. The book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*, by Tim Lawrence, recalls the era as 'a ferociously inventive period characterized by its creativity, intensity and hybridity'.[3] It was not about watching something, but being part of something. It joined music, art, performance art, entrepreneurs, DJs, street artists, film and video all together to experience something unique and vivacious at places such as the Roxy and the Mudd Club. There is nothing more iconic when thinking of the 1980s, than disco and the movie *Saturday Night Fever* starring John Travolta. Though the movie came out in 1977, it depicted not just the dance, but the world of disco that gained momentum through the 80s. Disco was very important for non-mainstream groups including the Black, Latinx and queer communities in the 1980s, providing an outlet and a community that shared in and escaped from some of the inequalities of the mainstream world.

New York has always enjoyed many literary circles, uptown and downtown. Today, at all levels of literary beginnings and ultimate success, there are groups full of people like-minded in their work and drive for creativity. In the 1980s, the literary cliques had a small-town feel during the day and by night attended gallery openings, clubs and perhaps went out to dinner with the likes of celebrities such as Andy Warhol, well known for attending literary affairs. The era launched influential works, such as Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple,* Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* Jay McInerny's *Bright Lights, Big City,* and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Caryn James from the *New York Times Magazine*, talks about the change in literary circles from intellectual salons, where tight knit groups clutched their bourbon as they debated Hemingway, to a more rigorous and high society kind of feel in 1987:

> In New York today young authors live in a swifter-than-sound atmosphere, full of energy, hype and distractions. The change reflects new realities in the city and in the publishing industry: higher rents and tougher urban living combined with pressure to bring out a book of fiction before the first blush of youth has passed.[4]

Tama Janowitz's *Slaves of New York* gives a wonderful, if partially exaggerated, description of the time where aspiring and accomplished artists struggle with the pull of city life, a deep need to be trendy, and the wiles of gallery life and clubs where celebrities mix and mingle all while carving out time to write.

The 1990s had its own wildly coloured, fantastically unique persona, beginning the decade even worse than the ones prior but ending on a completely unexpected high note. 1990 had the highest crime record of all time. In 1991, the Crowne Heights riot in Brooklyn between the Black and Jewish communities began when two Black children were hit by a station wagon in a motorcade for a prominent Jewish rabbi. In 1993, a truck bomb exploded in the parking garage of the north tower in the World Trade Centre killing six people. It was also the time of oversized pants, DKNY sweaters and rollerblades. *Seinfeld* and *Friends* ruled television and, quite honestly, other than the fabulous girls' apartment in *Friends*, everything those two shows depict about New York City is absolutely accurate. Even the fights over getting a phone number with the 212 area code.

Despite the highest crime of all time, the 1990s began a beautification emphasis to bring safety and family-friendly aspects to the streets. Times Square, in particular, was rezoned, making it illegal to have strip clubs and XXX bookstores in that central location. In a deal with Disney, the city worked a plan to bring big corporations into Times Square, such as ESPN, Virgin Records and MTV Studios. The New York City Police Department focused on a plan that would address small crimes; for example, jumping the subway turnstiles, graffiti and aggressive squeegee-wielding window washers. It worked, and the city's crime levels dropped even more than the national average and Times Square drew tourists and businesses, making it a colourful mecca of industry.

However, nothing says the 1990s quite like the punk rock scene that stemmed from the rebellious squatters of that era. Ash Thayer's novel, *Kill City*, takes an insider's view of the Lower East Side in Manhattan. A severe housing crisis left around 30,000 homeless; the wait for low-income housing was approximately ten years. Former President Jimmy Carter's federally funded housing plans allowed abandoned buildings to be claimed, once they were brought up to code, by anyone willing to put in the money and work. So squatters moved in and habituated several buildings, such as Dos Blockos on East Ninth Street and Thirteenth Street Squat, forming their own communities of families, singles, anyone needing a home and bold enough to squat. The punk world was all about the freedom of non-conformity. As Thayer says:

> We dyed our hair crazy colours, and cut or shaved it in dishevelled and nonsensical ways. If there was any sense of competition, it was about who could say fuck you the loudest with their appearance … God, it felt so good to stop trying to fit in. The punk community taught me that I could take the pain and rage I felt and do something productive with it, involving social activism, music, and artistic expression.[5]

The art scene in 1990s was incredibly influential in how we see, understand and appreciate art today. Like the punk scene, the art world questioned, pushed the limits, and rebelled. Art that was shocking then opened doors to what we might commonly accept now. New York gallery owner Mary Boone, named 'The New Queen of the Art Scene' in the 1980s, talked about the shift in the 90s: 'Value in everything is being questioned', she said. 'The psychology in the 80s was excess; in the 90s, it's about conservation.'[6]

Nothing said shocking as much as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, 1987, from his *Bodies of Work* series. Even though he was expressing aspects of his own faith and trying to address the way the crucifix had turned into a piece of fashion – an accessory – rather than its association with the death of a man, the Catholic League and Christian community was outraged, later destroying his work.

In the musical theatre world, ticket prices were rising and attendance was decreasing. In the 90s, however, it was the era of *Rent, Rag Time,* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Disney opened up even more doors for spectacular musical theatre: *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* forever raised expectations with their larger-than-life costuming and stage planning. *Rent*, a rock musical about a group of young artists in New York dealing with the realities of HIV/AIDS started Off Broadway, but ended up winning a Tony Award. The shows tackled grittier topics and worked to appeal to a youthful audience; they ushered in a new era by resurrecting Broadway into something fresh.

In publishing, the 1990s saw literary works such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes,* Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History,* to name a few. The literary clubs began taking a slight decline moving towards what would become, in the 2000s, a time of coffee house writing circles, more than bars. Especially once the smoking ban hit in 2003, it effectively curtailed cigarette smoking while writing in public indoor spaces, which many older writers felt was a consummate part of the communal writing process, and attendance began to dwindle.

So much of the renewal of the city was taken on by grassroots efforts by people who decided to bring on change and make a difference. The climate of both the 1980s and 1990s was grit mixed with hope and it was the art that created the way ahead. Art has a way of bringing people together and forging a path ahead, especially in time of crisis or difficulty. New York has always been like many small towns linked together to make one large city, the city that doesn't sleep.

One of the most striking things about New York is not the glitz and glamour of each decade, but how the neighbourhoods create community. It is that way now just as much as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. New York is a walking city where you are alongside people constantly, where you know the names of the cashiers at the deli and the dry cleaners. In the neighbourhood I live in, with the elementary school close by, instead of long car lines dropping off children, the whole neighbourhood seems to walk to school together every morning. Many streets are quite timeless. If you changed the cars and the fashion, you'd never know which era you might be in. The possibility for spontaneous beauty is remarkable. I once had a meeting with an editor in a part of Harlem that I hadn't been to before. I arrived early and right across the street was the gorgeous Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The autumn leaves were at peak colour and all around the cathedral is a little park and walkway with fascinating sculptures. I spent the next fifteen minutes in wonder, joyfully taking in the magic of the moment. It's important to understand that aspect when you try to understand New York at a given time. There are big culturally influencing trends and moments, but that river of energy that makes you want to just jump in and be part of it, is at the root of what makes New York remarkable. It's all about the people. It's all about the art.

L.A. CHANDLAR IS THE AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK BESTSELLING *ART DECO MYSTERY SERIES* PUBLISHED BY KENSINGTON PUBLISHING. THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE JAN–FEB 2020 ISSUE OF *NGV MAGAZINE*.

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‘It is remarkable to me that two strangers looking at the same painting could meet in this way – as if for a moment they’d experienced the world through one and the same pair of eyes.’

Me and my Muse

Collaboration, friendship, inspiration, loss, love and connection. These themes filter through many artworks on display at NGV over spring and summer, from the Petrina Hicks and Polixeni Papapetrou exhibitions at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, through to *KAWS: Companionship in the Age of Loneliness* at NGV International. In this *Deep Read*, we discover that, for some, a muse can come from unexpected places and consider the essential role of emotion, closeness and truth in the creative process.

BY KIM DEVEREUX

The first time I met Professor Adam Zeman was in his office at the University of Exeter, England. The small room was a cave of bookshelves and the table seemed to barely be holding up under foot-high stacks of papers. I was hoping to persuade him to become the supervisor for my creative writing PhD. His area of expertise was cognitive and behavioural neurology, but he also had a passion for the arts and was the author of *Consciousness: A User’s Guide*. I doubted I would succeed. After we sat down, he told me he had just received several thousand emails in response to a paper on Aphantasia, a mysterious disorder involving a complete loss of visual imagination. ‘My cup is full,’ he added.

After about twenty minutes of conversation I noticed a postcard pinned on the wall behind his desk. It depicted a painting by Rembrandt, *Portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels*, c. 1654–56. It is thought to depict the woman who entered his house as a servant and became his partner (they never married) and perhaps his muse. Hendrickje Stoffels was sitting in a chair looking back at me, as if I was no stranger to her. Adam also contemplated the card and remarked that it was one of his favourite paintings. It was as if, for a moment, in this triangle, no-one was a stranger. I asked Adam, ‘What does it make you feel?’

He looked at the painting and then at me, his face suddenly soft with being moved, and answered: ‘Her lips are slightly parted, as if about to speak. She’s so alive and yet she’s dead.’ His eyes were a little moist yet neither of us broke the eye contact, and while we continued to simply look, something seemed to be becoming clear, as if truth itself was now ‘feelable’.

After that, the conversation took on a different tone and depth, and our dialogue has continued ever since. It still seems remarkable to me that two strangers looking at the same painting could meet in this way – as if for a moment they’d experienced the world through one and the same pair of eyes.

My poem *Meeting* is from my current novel.

Meeting
Eyes find eyes,
Yours – a forest pool lit by evening sun.
Light filters through debris of leaves,
Suddenly the waters clear,
Light reaches further,
The pool’s deeper than I thought.

And I can see you there,
Searching for words,
As if you’re free-diving,
Stirring up silt, which hangs for moments
like silver curtains over your eyes.
I wait for you to come back.

At last your lips part,
You want to speak
But your eyes well up
Whatever you found down there,
Slips back in, making a little wave.

Your eyes bathe in feeling,
A tear pools in the bottom lid, stays there.
You don’t look away, not even for a moment,

Your eyes, faithful to what is moving,
And yet still holding mine, which are moist too,
As I see all the way to the bottomless.

This essay started out as an enquiry into the role my friends, or 'muses', in the writing of my current novel and my previous one, *Rembrandt's Mirror* (2015). Many great works of art are of course inspired by relationships, be they intellectual, romantic or friendly. The more I considered the question, the more I realised that I am inspired by conversations with a couple of friends and that those conversations have something in common: They are allowed to hop from topic to topic, they get deeply personal, and they are quite unpredictable. My process seems to be that afterwards, often the next morning, I write, while the experience still resonates in my body and psyche, folding it into my writing at the time, like seeds to be germinated by the reader's attention.

Let's look a little more closely at what is at work between me and my muse when we converse or gaze at each other in silence. The experience reminds me of German philosopher Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) notion of 'presencing', or in German '*anwesen sein*', which means being fully present both mentally and physically. I will use 'presencing', to describe an experiential state of being that leads to insights. These 'insights', can involve noticing tiny details, such as the skin around the skin around the eye reddening a little and a loosening of facial muscles when we feel moved. To me these details are both reliably real and a kind of doorway to the bigger picture.

Heidegger used the concept of the hermeneutic circle to describe that the reality of the whole is situated in the detailed experience of the parts. In other words, another level of understanding can be accessed through external phenomena, appearances and everyday existence.

'My aim is to show how 'presencing' of truth occurs in open-hearted dialogue and how this process is mirrored in the resulting work of art, which in turn acts as an attuned dialogue partner.'

——— KIM DEVEREUX

I believe that a close connection is a pre-requisite, for fleeting experiences to become a door to existential truths. I liken this to the way Monet's faithful recording of the appearance of a haystack at sunset in frosty weather reveals something about the world beyond that particular haystack in the winter of 1890.

This 'presencing' of truth which occurs in open-hearted dialogue or in nature is revived when we enter a conversation with the resulting work of art. It is the work that then takes on the role of an attuned dialogue partner.

I will now describe in a little more detail the two aspects that are key to my writing process: the loss of detachment and the need to access meaning as experience.

A loss of detachment.

In the autumn of 1885, Van Gogh visited the newly opened Rijksmuseum with his friend Anton Kerssemakers. Van Gogh told his friend to go ahead and visit the rest of the museum so he could remain with Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Couple as Isaac and Rebecca (formerly known as The Jewish Bride)*, c. 1665 – c. 1669. When Kerssemakers returned, Van Gogh told him, 'Would you believe it – and I honestly mean what I say – I should be happy to give 10 years of my life if I could go on sitting here in front of this picture for a fortnight, with only a crust of dry bread for food'.[1]

The anecdote illustrates the power of a completed work of art. But where and how does the process start? In Greek mythology muses are the gods and goddesses which provide inspiration to us mortals. They are considered the source of knowledge, embodied in literature, science and the arts.

According to the Oxford dictionary a muse is 'a person or personified force who is the source of inspiration for a creative artist'. I certainly draw on people. For example, the artwork and philosophy of one of the main protagonists in my current novel, *The Generosity of Darkness*, is inspired by conversations with the ceramic sculptor Tony Lattimer and the overall theme of my novel has emerged in my conversations with Adam Zeman. What is it then about these conversations that has proved inspiring? For one thing, emotion is not only welcome, we treat it as a homing beacon. If eyes glisten, the throat becomes a little choked or it gets harder to find words then we know we're getting close to something that matters and we move towards it. And this yields inspiring finds. Or in the words of the main character in Stephen King's 1982 novel *The Body*:

> The most important things are the hardest to say. ... The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure...

Experiencing the personal and the deeply private is a way to articulating a truth that the reader can relate to. So let me describe a particular occasion:

Adam and I were speaking about grief. I touched on a break-up I experienced decades ago. Soon it became difficult
for me to find words let alone speak them. What was stopping me in my tracks was not the memory of breaking up but a recollection of my boyfriend's presence. So vivid I almost could have touched him.

I later wrote the poem *The heaviness of those who love completely*. Seeing that I was struggling to speak, Adam said, 'Sadness can slow you to a halt.' Then he added that a particular piece of music, one of the Rückert-Lieder by composer Gustav Mahler, always moved him to tears, especially the version recorded by Janet Baker in 1988. I suggested he play it. He hesitated for a moment, then googled it and pressed play. I watched him out of the corners of my eyes. He had sunk deeper into his chair as if his body had lost all aliveness. His gaze was empty as if all of him was engaged inwards. Janet Baker sang in German:

> I am dead to the world's tumult,
> And I rest in a quiet realm!
> I live alone in my heaven,
> In my love and in my song!

I realised that our griefs were not precisely the same but there was something they had in common.
I could tell because the subject of our conversation – grief – acquired a presence in the room. It was like the difference between talking about apples and seeing a particular apple on the table in front of you.

Adam's body still looked as if his attention was elsewhere, trained on an unreachable infinity. When the music stopped and our eyes met, it seemed as if I could see that part of him that had reached the infinity, but my very human friend was also looking back at me, still with emotion in his eyes. It was as if we'd both tasted the same apple.

I realised in that moment, in another part of my brain, that I was experiencing the central theme of my novel: our inevitable mortality and separateness and yet the possibility of reunion with what is right here.

Adam wrote later, 'It is only through form (a sunset, a horizon, a loved one's gaze or body) that we glimpse the eternally beguiling but unattainable possibilities of formlessness – the silence and the ripeness beyond the tangible or visible...'

Instead of being detached observers, through a process of 'presencing', we came to know something from the heart of the experience. So what is the nature of this experiential truth and how can we touch it?

Presencing.

In 1885, Van Gogh, wrote in a letter to his brother Theo: 'Rembrandt goes so deep into the mysterious that he says things for which there are no words in any language. It is with justice that they call Rembrandt—[a] magician.'[2]

The things-for-which-there-are-no-words remain hidden when approached with conceptual thought. They need to be experienced to be known. The currency of this experience, as we have seen, is deeply personal, but in allowing it we can touch on truth, perhaps even *the* truth.

The conversation about grief
I described suggests that in emotionally engaged dialogue some kind of dynamic is at play that allows us to feel more fully, more presently, than if we were contemplating grief in our own mind alone.

By definition, dialogue involves at least two partners, and it involves a 'showing up' – an awareness of how I am in that moment of dialogue. Sad, happy, grumpy, aloof, scattered or tired. It does not matter which. What matters is authenticity; allowing the heaviness of my eyelids or the tensing of my jaw to be there, welcoming reality as it is.

In open-hearted dialogue, I don't look at the content of my experience – for example sadness – the way I would look at a tree from across the road. Rather, I sit in the tree, hearing the leaves rustle, feeling the bark under my fingers and the slight swaying of the branch I'm sitting on.

The nature of this experience reminds me of Heidegger's fundamental point that being is always being *here* or being-in-the-world. I believe there is an aspect to our practice of dialogue that supports an awareness of experience in the body as opposed to resorting to concepts that bypass this felt experiencing. One contributing factor to being present in this way is active mirroring – through empathy but also through body language.

In fact, the two are connected. Neuroscientists have identified mirror neurons as being instrumental in not only reading the emotions and movements of others but allowing us to feel them as if they were our own. So, if you see someone hammering in a nail, some of the same neurons are discharged as if you are hammering in a nail yourself. The same is true for facial expressions and body language. Mirror neurons mean that we really do have a pretty accurate sense of how someone else is feeling and we can feel with them. This leads to both a loss of detachment – a virtue in my book – and deeper understanding.

This makes it possible for a shared sense of 'being here' to emerge. This is not a static state but a dynamic process where the dialogue partners are engaged in subtle feedback loops of reciprocal mirroring. I believe the looped and coupled nature of emotionally connected dialogue results in an ever-clearer sense of what is being

explored. It is almost as if truth is being distilled between two people.[3]

There might be an explanation for this. Andy Clark, a philosopher and proponent of 'the extended mind' hypothesis, describes a process where an agent (me, the writer) and an external structure (my notebook or my friend) become part of the same cognitive process. He describes a coupling between the two in such a manner that the external structure reflects back to the agent the results of her internal processes. He likens the process to a turbo-driven automobile engine:

> The turbocharger uses exhaust flow from the engine to spin a turbine that spins an air pump that compresses the air flowing into the engine. The compression squeezes more air into each cylinder; allowing more fuel to be combined, leading to more powerful explosions (that drive the engine that creates the exhaust flow that powers the turbo).

So, the emotionally engaged dialogue is enhancing the cognitive engine, thereby facilitating cognitive leaps and insights. The dialogue is not about the idea of sadness, or pre-existing knowledge of sadness, but our personal in-the-moment experience of it. The more specific, the more personal the experience, then the more it can reveal. It is that which I try to capture in my writing.

Communion with art. Can a work of art take on the role of dialogue partner?

Like Van Gogh, I too have wanted to spend a long time in front of Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Couple as Isaac and Rebecca*. Each time I've seen it, the woman has appeared to have a differed expression: sad, moved, inwards, contemplative, warm, joyful. How is this possible?

As we've seen, mirror neurons can help us get quite an accurate sense of how someone feels, but the face of the woman is painted in broad brushstrokes, which allow her expression to be interpreted in different ways.

Perception itself relies on the brain to fill in the blanks as it could never assemble the combined input from all the senses into a coherent reality in real-time. So, according to neuroscientific research, what we see of the world is the mind's best guess of reality. It seems that Rembrandt too was aware of how the mechanics of perception could be exploited. His pupil Samuel Van Hoogstraten wrote in 1678 in his book on painting:

> Do not to concern yourselves too much with small details of shadows. [...] In the same way that a man, catching sight of his friend from a distance or meeting him in twilight, straight away sees his appearance in his mind and recognizes him, so a rough sketch can often create such a great impression on beholders that they can see more in it than is actually there.[4]

In the twentieth century, art historian Ernst Gombrich coined the term 'the beholder's share' to describe what we contribute to the experience of a work of art. It is as if we and the work of art become partners in 'presencing'. A dynamic dialogue unfolds between what I see in the painting, for example the expression on the woman's face, and this in turn affects my emotions and where my eyes travel next, which affects what I see, and so on. It is similar to the reiterative mirroring in an intimate dialogue. The same process occurs when we read novels or watch a Shakespeare play. Especially with Shakespeare, a vast number of interpretations is not only possible but sustained over the duration of the play through the use of ambiguity, metaphor and imagery.

As in a human dialogue we might find something of ourselves mirrored, but what about the truth? The physicist Henri Bortoft, following in Goethe's footsteps, believed that imagination can become an organ of perception: 'I get the sense that when you do it you are moving in another space, an imaginal realm. It is a movement. And it seems more real than the outer world.'[5]

Bortoft believed that through very exact sensorial imagination, an underlying unity – reality beyond the distinction between subject and object – can be experienced.

Some things are hidden when regarded with detachment. Those things, in order to be revealed, require a loss of detachment, they can only be seen from within the experience.

The change in title for the work by Rembrandt, from The *Jewish Bride* to *Portrait of a Couple as Isaac and Rebecca*, is important because there is evidence that the painting is based on the real relationship of the two sitters. Rembrandt was rarely a detached observer, nor was he interested in how men or women should look. For example, he recorded faithfully the indentations on a woman's calves from wearing garters or, in this case, the love of this particular couple. There is no other painting like it. The portrayal of the man's hand on the woman's chest and the way her hand welcomes it, is bold and original. It is the pose, the expressions, the colours and so much more besides that reveals that-for-which-there-are-no-words to anyone willing to look at it, and wait, and feel.

KIM DEVEREUX IS AUTHOR OF *REMBRANDT'S MIRROR*, PUBLISHED BY ATLANTIC BOOKS. THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE NOV–DEC 2019 ISSUE OF *NGV MAGAZINE*.

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The heaviness of those who love completely

BY KIM DEVEREUX

The scent
of sun-cooked blackberries,
soaks everything,
This kind of joy
cannot be recollected by synapses,
But the forest remembers
the imprint of their bodies in the damp moss;
The air still carries eddies of their laughter
and the brook the fleeting form of feet.
Her hand reaches out to find
the line of his cheek again.

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1. 1 Jeff Nussbaum, 'The night New York saved itself from bankruptcy', 16 Oct. 2015, *The New Yorker*, <www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-night-new-york-saved-itself-from-bankruptcy>, accessed 4 Nov. 2019.
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5. Ash Thayer, 'New York City Squatters in the 1990s', 12 July 1996, *Flashbak*, <flashbak.com/new-york-city-squatters-in-the-1990s-before-the-fall-361000/>, accessed 4 Nov. 2019.
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1. Van Gogh's remark to friend Anton Kerssemakers; as cited in 'De Amsterdammer, Weekblad voor Nederland',14 April1912, p.6; as quoted in Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, Amsterdam University Press,19 9 7, p.155.
2. Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh [letter534], on or about 10 October 1885, in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten & Nienke Bakker (eds), *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute, Amsterdam, 2009, <http://vangoghletters.org/en/let534>, accessed 11 October 2019.
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4. Samuel Van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst; anders de zichtbaere werelt.* Rotterdam, 1678 p.2 7.
5. Henri Bortoft interviewed by Claus Otto Scharmer, Presencing Institute, London,14 July 1999.