

**Echo in the Hollow: artist talk given by Tiffany Titshall January 2024**

These works were created on and depict imagery seen on Dja Dja Wurrung country - very much thinking of its ancestors and we have been given permission to use the Djaara word Biyal for River Redgum.

I have always been interested in trees - the gestural limbs and majestic qualities of these giant ancestors we see - dead but still standing on farmed grassy hills. Remnants of hundreds of years prior to white invasion. I don't think I thought about that at 20 when I drove around the countryside saying to myself one day I will stop and draw some. I just had an intuitive attraction to their sculptural and ancient qualities. My eye was drawn to their endlessly fascinating and varied scars that created unique personalities on the horizon. I was, perhaps searching for the history that on the surface did not exist in white Australia. For clues to ancient times, driven by what we studied in our school books about Egypt or the Aegean relics.

For years I have created psychological landscapes and tree portraits as analogies for my inner life but also sometimes representing public or political issues such as gender/equality/sexuality/erosion and the environment. One can always be a symbol for the other. The themes can be so interchangeable that it is only when a body of work is finished that I see what personal meaning lies beneath. Sometimes years later another narrative is revealed. It is hard to see all of what our minds are trying to express when we are in the moment and that is something I love about art making - creating can be an act of serendipity so we continue because we all want to know what comes next. Sometimes there are spooky predictions!

In the case of this body of work it is really just the beginning of a new creative journey for me in terms of my practice - I will continue when time can afford it and I will leave for another thread of thought and return to it when it feels right. I had been working for a few years on a collaborative body of work called The Chosen Vessel, with the ceramicist Belinda Michael. This was a departure from my usual work and involved drawing on ceramics and storytelling. The collaborative inspiration really pushed me to try new processes, mediums and methods. During the long lockdown years I was able to spend time learning to draw on ceramics and take some of those techniques back to paper. I was also able to make the time to practice using ink washes and eventually create finished ink drawings of the stories depicted on the ceramic vessels. The landscape I chose as a stage to set the scene for our vessel story was our local Tullaroop reservoir where I have spent a lot of time sinking into the mesmerising stillness. I had thought about the bush and figures in the scratchy, complex, and

beautiful scrub but the stage-like backdrop of a large body of water appealed to me. It brought to mind those aegean relics and ancient Greek stories of sirens and rocks and the creation of myths. Belinda and I were conjuring a new myth together. I had many thoughts surrounding that landscape as a backdrop, as a ravaged, dammed, and eroded land, and as timeless and ever present.

When The Chosen Vessel was completed I continued with the ink washes, the water and rocks, and started coming closer to the drowned trees. I also work from photographs and have been capturing images around here for decades.

The first work included in this show is Drowned Lands. I had been working in washes and effects and formulated a layered method so that the blue background is a wash that gives the sense of the movement of particles in the water and sky as you stare into it on a sunny day. This ghost tree is one that I had also drawn on a vessel as a symbol of a captured being abused by drowning. The Biyal here is long dead and slowly these trees are toppling into the water as they become more brittle. This could be a metaphor for time or life and human bodies too but here it is an example of a remnant presence and a home for birds and insects with a hidden story or history written in its textures and scars.

The work next to it called Eglè is where I tried to expand on the method and was not happy with the result so I played further and added some symbolic elements including the two trees and the snake. This work is both a symbol of history and reconciliation and a representation of a Lithuanian myth of a snake goddess who was a woman betrothed to a snake. I was interested in the story from a feminine personal perspective and also the idea of different animals representing tribes and possession. The snake forms a ring like a marriage of two.

In the next work, Deity, the tree stands with a large gall like the head of a prehistoric creature or some sort of icon overlooking country with an aurora borealis-like sky. I was trying to capture the feeling of being in that space and in the water where reflections, movement, and light can trick the eye like the scenes where sailors can be lost or confused.

Along from that is Theatre of Cruelty, which is the title for a type of experimental theatre which may include a sequence of images that shock and jar the audience. Its cruelty is supposed to reveal a deeper meaning in life. In this type of theatre light, sound and grotesque gesture are meant to shock the audience with a minimum of words and I am interested in that idea. I felt that in this image the blue woman could be performing and I liked the idea of not having to explain things in words. .although I am asked to do so now...

She is standing out of place or about to perform on this strangely lit otherworldly stage on ravaged country where rocks gleam to represent gold rush damage on the edges of what was once a creek. The same two trees as depicted in the snake image are again present as potential symbols. The idea of this kind of theatre is also strongly aligned with surrealism, which referring back to serendipity has always been an element of my image making. The inventor of this type of theatre - Antonin Artaud - believed theatre is a double of life and life is a double of theatre which connects nicely with the reflected images.

Next along, Bodily it is the first of the mirrored works and the only purely charcoal on white image. I had been thinking about the angle of this dead tree that is sometimes situated on the fluctuating shoreline and how it can look like the siren or bow of a ship when we view it from our tinny (Thalassa) on the res. I kept thinking if I mirror this image I could make a boat shape from it. Then the concept of mirroring brought more ways of seeing and representing concepts to me. When something is mirrored it can be more body-like as in a torso or brain or arms and legs and can symbolise all sorts of things but the actual process of making two opposing images the same but hand drawn so slightly different is also an interesting exercise and a play for the eye and the mind of the viewer that I wanted to share and allow ideas to spring from. Opposite this work is Shadow which both shadows itself and the opposite image by being the same mirrored image swapped around but with a black ink wash.

Alongside that is my favourite diptych in the series called Echo in the Hollow. I should mention that the titles come after the work and it is always fun to research stories and poems and let the title find the image. The image is once again mirrored and creates this sense of ancient eyes or a mask watching the viewer or something to look through with these other trees dancing in the distance. It has its own alchemy once the two parts are joined. There are many symbols and thoughts I have yet to form into words for this piece but to explain how I came to the title. I was researching tree myths and tree worship around the world such as Inanna and the Huluppu tree as these myths are universal in their messages. In the story Inanna finds and plants the tree to grow herself a throne and then is distressed when a snake and bird nest in her tree so a brother cuts it down to carve her a throne and bed, which probably says a lot about many cultures throughout history. For the title I returned from there to a favourite story about Echo and Narcissus and felt the name resonated as I was thinking about alchemy, symmetry, mirrors, cavities, vortexes, and skies and the words echo and hollow offered many possible connotations. At this point I was pulling together a series of works in progress to form a theme for this

particular exhibition which I decided should really make an argument for the appreciation and preservation of trees.

This leads back to the first image at the entrance to the exhibition, This Tree Lives. I wanted to contrast the others, which were all dead trees, with this one vibrantly living tree. I had dreamt recently of a very large tree in a storm with its limbs flying wildly about and that was part of the vision I had for this tree but also I had been in the gallery when planning the exhibition and there was a tapestry of similar size in that position. It was by the Carisbrook stitch group and they had created it in response to the floods when they had made quilts for those affected. I saw this large mostly pink quilt and with this tree image in my mind I decided to create the largest drawing I have ever made for that space. When I chose a tree that exists within a kilometre of my home I was also interested in the fact that it may or may not be a scar tree making reference to the way indigenous populations were able to harvest parts of trees and leave the trees living to be worshipped and loved as ancestry or family members.