

## WAYS OF SEEING

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There are many ways of making pictures. You can make pictures with paint on canvas; and you can make pictures with pencils on paper. If you are a photographer, you can make pictures on paper with light. If you are a writer, then your business is making pictures out of words. And it is this last that I am most familiar with.

I would hazard a guess, though, that all of us who strive to make pictures, in each of our particular ways, do so at least partly out of a desire to say to others - 'This is what I saw, and this is how I saw it. Let me show it to you in the way that it looked to me, in that moment'.

The curator of this exhibition is Lauren Black, a botanical artist, and in putting this exhibition together, Lauren has provided for us a kind of timeline of perception, a specific, local history of different ways of seeing.

Moving through the early, ladylike illustrations of the Allport women, through to the scientific work of botanists like the inestimable Winifred Curtis, to the bold, sensual contemporary photography of Allegra Biggs-Dale - this exhibition shows us how we have changed. For the plants have not. Their forms endure even while our ways and means of representing them develop and diversify.

Binding together all the moments of seeing in this exhibition is one particular landmark that is important to us all, and that will be celebrated in a festival in the coming weeks.

One other word painter, former Tasmanian and Oxford scholar Peter Conrad, once had this to say of our mountain:

"My childhood was overshadowed by a brutal, bad-tempered eminence: a mountain. Hobart belongs to Mt Wellington. It looms suddenly above the city and grimaces from a height of four thousand feet; it squeezes the settlement, denying it toehold. It terminates every view, invigilates every back yard. My parents would sometimes anxiously peer through the window before venturing out, 'to see what the mountain

was doing'. It dictated our blustery, lachrymose weather, and in turn determined our moods." (From *Down Home*)

Mt Wellington was the backdrop to my childhood as well. But it was not, to me, monstrous or obstructive, but rather comforting. I suppose I thought of it as a big dog that curled itself in protective sleep around our city. Something like an Irish wolfhound, perhaps. Surely, it would wake up, barking and growling, if it were needed to avert any disaster. Perhaps the difference in our views is due, in part, to the different times in which we lived and wrote in the shadow of the mountain. The mountain has not changed, but we have, and my Hobart, I think, is less in the grip of a cultural cringe than was Conrad's.

These days, Mt Wellington the very immediate backdrop to my life. Since I live at Fern Tree, it more or less rises up out of my front yard. My very little daughter has learned its name, and is learning that how close or far we are from home depends on how close or far we are from the mountain.

I know that it is politically incorrect these days to like mountains for the views they afford. That sort of thing can lead to accusations of peak-bagging. But I'm afraid that I would be telling a lie if I didn't say that I love Mt Wellington for its very mountain-ness. I love the bulk of it, the scope of it, the scale of it. I love it for all the different ways of seeing that it offers - both as a vantage point, and as a point of reference. I am fascinated by the different views available FROM the mountain, as you gradually ascend its slopes. And I am fascinated by the different views OF the mountain that you gather as you move around it - the way it looks from the Huon Valley, the way it looks when you round the bend on the airport road when and it's there to tell you that you're home, the way it looks from Sorell, the way it looks when you first see it from the Midlands Highway and know that you're back in the south, the way it looks from a house in Fern Tree's Bracken Lane.

This exhibition, however, details what is contained within the bulk of that mountain. I'm thinking of fractal geometry now, and how, if we were to zoom in on smaller and smaller and smaller sections of the mountain, reducing our focus from a whole horizon down to what might fill the eyepiece of a microscope, we would find magic at each vantage point, it would just be magic of a different scale.

Another word painter – and this time I am quoting a woman, Tasmanian poet Adrienne Eberhard, in order to harmonise with the theme of this exhibition – has given us the following images of the intimacies of the mountain in her poem 'Morphology'.

"We leave the road and plunge into different air,  
Blown from the Southern Ocean it carries fierce cold.  
Underneath, wet pineapple grass sinks and rots,  
Its red berries clustering heartlike; rubies  
In a serrated crown. Cushion plants spread green velvet  
And rope-rush loops its stems into soft-sprung bodies.  
Sphagnum sinks under boots, prints puddling its form.

*Walk carefully here.*

Over 10,000 years ago plants climbed to higher ground  
As ice receded, invading the domain of dolerite,  
Sinking roots into clay, their little deaths  
Building dark peat where new plants flourish.  
String bog. Pools in a linked chain, cool jewels  
Nestling at the mountain's throat.

*Look closely.*

This mountain's history is collection: flanks scoured,  
Plants sampled, examined, described and stored."

These beautiful words resonate with the works in this exhibition, which represent the various microcosms of the mountain. Gwen Egg's work takes us gradually upwards, as she weaves small structures from the intricate, physical details she has found at various altitudes. Rosalind Minchin's photographs also take us from the foothills to the summit by way of her elegantly photographed botanical specimens. Erin Tappe's textile work picks out in thread the occurrences of various species along a stringline. All the work here asks us to recall William Blake, who exhorted us:

“To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.” (From ‘Auguries of Innocence’)

I said before that all of us who strive to make pictures, in each of our particular ways, do so at least partly out of a desire to say to others - 'This is what I saw, and this is how I saw it. Let me show it to you in the way that it looked to me, in that moment'. We are also saying, when we take these visions beyond the ephemeral, and commit them to some kind of enduring medium, 'this is something worth keeping'.

And this is why there is often such a strong relationship between art and conservation. Many natural places have escaped destruction because enough artists have been able to capture and then share a particular way of seeing them.

This is, of course, something that is relevant well beyond environmentalism. There are few debates that the world would fail to benefit from a situation in which more people were able to share and appreciate each other's particular ways of seeing.

And so, I would like to officially open this exhibition, and to invite you all to enjoy what it offers: a magical prism of different ways of seeing.