

HELEN SEIVER

ARE WE THERE YET?



Cover:  
*Earth Storm*  
2007  
oil paint and wax  
120 x 90 x 5 cm  
Photo: Lloyd-Smith  
Photography

Overleaf:  
*Gross Domestic Product Series (V)*  
detail  
2018  
Welded riggers wire and  
found shovel heads

#### Bunbury Regional Art Gallery

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Open 10am-4pm daily

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Bunbury Regional Art Gallery  
is on Wardandi Noongar land.

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#### Helen Seiver wishes to thank:

Thank you to Julian Bowron and all of the staff of  
the Bunbury Regional Art Gallery not only for this  
opportunity but also for their generous and ongoing  
support of me and arts in the South West.

Perdita Phillips, Sharon Tassiker and Julian Bowron,  
thank you for your articulate and generous words  
and for your time and patience to understand my  
processes and ideas.

Joshua Ledger, my patient husband, who supports  
and encourages me with love and generosity of spirit.  
Thank you.

H E L E N   S E I V E R

A R E   W E   T H E R E   Y E T ?



Department of  
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## F O R E W O R D

Helen Seiver is, in many ways, the perfect example of a regional artist. Her practice is characterised by a number of qualities, if not values, which exemplify a way of working that is often demonstrated by artists who chose to live and work in regional Australia.

The first of these qualities is resourcefulness. Helen finds and collects readily available materials which she repurposes while continuing to honour their stories and integrity but avoiding excessive nostalgia. The second is a profound respect for, and concern about, the fragile state of the natural world in which the artist lives. This is borne out by her choice of materials and very particular approaches to artmaking. The next quality can perhaps best be described as contributing, which Helen demonstrates by her openness and generosity, sharing her time and knowledge, especially through teaching and mentoring.

The last two of these qualities go hand-in-hand. First a directness of approach to her subject which is evident in making largely unadorned objects which engage immediately with viewers through the inherent qualities of the materials and a resulting playfulness. Once we are engaged, the layers of meaning in the work begin to emerge. And finally, a pervasive wittiness underpins almost all of Helen's work, she is not afraid of having a bit of fun with her trolleys and rabbit-proof-wire clouds, of parodying herself and all the earnest rhetoric that underpins the concerns many of us have about living in this time in this place.

BRAG is proud and privileged to present *Helen Seiver: are we there yet?*, an important exhibition by a significant artist in our region.

**Julian Bowron**  
Gallery Director

*Stakeholders 2007*  
detail 2  
Photo: Lloyd-Smith  
Photography  
Courtesy: The Collection  
of Lloyd and Liz Horn

# B L A N K E T S                      A N D                      R U S T

## BY PERDITA PHILLIPS

There are certain recurrent themes present in the work of Southwest artist Helen Seiver. The artist combines a strong sense of the domestic with an interest in historical traces. Her sculptures are often colourful, yet on many occasions there is the suggestion of red soil and of rusted artefacts, of the stains of inheritance of past lives. Her work has developed from an early practice in painting to more exploratory working through found, modified and constructed objects resolved as sculptures and installations. Strong symbolic content is positioned against urgent issues. She refers to environmental problems and reconciliation. Her work concerns cultural inheritance and the role of women's lives in history. Given the large and varied body of work that Seiver has generated, I will focus here on the artistic functions of the objects that she has created, placing them within a local and national context.

In the early mixed media work, *Standing Safe* (2008), each drawer has been carefully curated as if it were a Wunderkammer of special things. It sits solidly as a domestic object, a chest of drawers from another time. The invitation to open the drawers is clear. Some of the receptacles are visually complex and full

to overflowing, showing the artist's love for the object as remnant and trace. But other drawers are testaments to what cannot be captured in materials — the space of the drawer itself a reminder of the evanescence of a feeling or the nature of air itself. Each drawer adds to a summary of things worth valuing: what to preserve, what to empty out; what is important, what is drifting.

To complete the work, Seiver has sewn up the external surfaces of the chest of drawers with strips of blanket. The blanket stitch used is skilful and measured. This domestic act of covering is one of caring; and speaks of a post WWII woollen economy. But the strident oranges, yellows and browns of the fabrics are the dry tones of Western Australian soils. Contrarily, the 'timbre' of the artwork's external appearance has been both *swaddled* and *brightened*: creating something that is both comforting and striking. This surface, combined with the tensions that build between the contents of each of the drawers, alludes to the ethically challenging task of combining the personal within settler-colonial experience with recognition of Indigenous dislocation, a theme which underlies much of the artist's practice.

Seiver has been strongly influenced by her contact with the landscapes of the southwest of Western Australian where she has spent many years and also through trips to the Goldfields and Pilbara. She notes, "living on the land (stolen) no matter where it is, is a constant responsibility".<sup>1</sup> Returning from an artist residency at Goongarrie north of Kalgoorlie in 2007, Seiver created *The Perfect Tent and How to Make it*. The idea was derived from the 1930s book, *Blackie's Girls' Annual*, that she read as a child<sup>2</sup>. The battered, corroded enamel bowls filled with broken ceramics were items dug up from the bush. The arrangement of the carefully sheathed poles (that have been cocooned in grey blankets), echo the tent frames of early gold seekers. Like many of her pieces, these are storied objects. They carry past histories in a way that makes them 'luminous objects'<sup>3</sup>. They ask us to listen to the stories that coalesce around them.

Painter Terri Brooks argues for the significance of the history of makeshift in Australian culture. For her, an Australian makeshift "would include an object or thing created either by (a) inventiveness or intuition utilising whatever materials were at hand, or (b) constructed in an



*Standing Safe* 2013  
detail  
Photo: Eva Fernandez



*Cloud Seed Express series 1* 2016  
150 x 300 x 100 cm  
welded found steel and objects (shadows)  
Photo: Lloyd-Smith Photography



## THEY CARRY PAST HISTORIES IN A WAY THAT MAKES THEM 'LUMINOUS OBJECTS'. THEY ASK US TO LISTEN TO THE STORIES THAT COALESCE AROUND THEM.

expedient or no nonsense manner that was 'good enough' for the job"<sup>4</sup>. The makeshift is intimately linked to tough times, mateship and self-deprecating humour. The impetus of improvisation and making-do provide an alternative history of the found object in Australian art that derives not from the anti-aesthetic Readymade, but from the vernacular. Seiver remembers visiting the former gold mining town of Gwalia and seeing "the make-do of scrap tin into shower rose or sieves for the kitchen. The reuse of food tins by the addition

of a wire handle or the use of gelignite box panels straight on the dirt to make a bedroom floor"<sup>5</sup>. Brooks defines an Australian Patina as the result of the collision of this makeshift with a 'love of land' (topophilia) and source material "as the land"<sup>6</sup>. Hence, a lineage can be drawn back to Depression era furniture and forward to Rosalie Gascoigne and Lorraine Connelly-Northey, the work of both of these artists having aesthetic alliances with Seiver's practice.

Like many of Seiver's works, *Cloud Seed Express* (2016) employs an Australian Patina. Made from collected tin and iron these six

portable trolleys wheel around wiry clouds made from rabbit-proof fencing mesh. Found skulls jostle with books and gold rush buttons dug from the ground. Linoleum-covered house forms try and blend home and bush. A battered ladder points to the sky. "They hold the precious bits and pieces — the flotsam and jetsam and traces of us in the landscape," says Seiver<sup>7</sup>. The works point to the folly and sadness of land clearing and climate change. The arrangement of elements is considered, yet irregular. Books on good soil practices jostle with bad economics. There are difficult, complex positions at stake and no simple answers. To me, the contrasts are played off against each other in a way that is joyously higgledy-piggledy, yet sincere.

Seiver's ability to combine disparate objects often results in a gentle humour of juxtaposition. Her work has prompted me to reconsider how such spindly, provisional humour operates in Australian art and how it might relate to certain currents in contemporary practice. Is it possible to be humorous about serious issues? Certainly, it is easy to be misinterpreted and humour in art can be seen as a retreat from profundity. But current debates in climate change show us just how hard it has become to convince people using the facts<sup>8</sup>. How can the self-deprecating makeshift version of Australian humour decentre certainty? In this type of aesthetic, earnestness always works alongside absurdity to produce new wisdoms. Seiver's work shows how productive a little bit of playfulness can be to bring warmth in to contemporary art.

Nevertheless, parallels can be drawn between the work of Seiver and artists such as Susan Kneebone and Louiseanne King. Both the latter tap into the veins of the natural and the domestic, of dark relations within history, and



Conversations with my mother 2014  
detail  
Photo: Eva Fernandez

the uncanny. Gerry Turcotte traces the signs of the Gothic genre in Australian literature and art from colonial times to the present<sup>9</sup>. Historically, what differentiates the Australian Gothic from its European precedents is the way that the spiritual malaise of a settler culture was enacted through landscapes as seemingly empty places of wildness, isolation and uncertainty. But as we know, these spaces were never truly empty and in more contemporary times the Australian Gothic has been utilised by artists to convey a more ambivalent position: the landscape contains “knowledge and yet a denial of past colonial deeds”<sup>10</sup>. Kneebone, King and others have explored this double condition in their work<sup>11</sup>. I would argue further, that the particular Australian condition allows for the expansion on from the standard tropes of darkness, the grotesque and the uncanny. In Seiver’s work, history erupts into the present, but often into bright sunlight, and through the qualities of sharp shadows and rusty patinas, allowing for “the possibility of transformation, of surviving the dislocation, act[ing] as a driving hope”<sup>12</sup>.

One of the reasons that Seiver has been able to shift on from simply reiterating absence in the landscape, is because of her approach to regrowth after significant personal trauma in her earlier life<sup>13</sup>. This can be seen in the careful crocheting that restores functionality to broken china and driftwood objects in the exhibition *Strangers in my Palace* (2013). *Heartstrings*, the lanky archway that was central to this project is composed of sticks and pre-loved clothes and fabrics. Seiver worked with friends to convert the cloth into string which was then crocheted into the structure. Walking through this vault (currently situated at the entry threshold of Seiver’s house) one can feel the memories entwined all around. One knows that important conversations have taken place

with the past and that this has been a healing process. Seiver’s career shows uncommon strength to deconstruct and then repair the damage of past incidences, without obscuring their ongoing resonances. This is evident in the skill with which taken-for-granted objects that carry with them their previous ‘luminousness’ are able to be reborn—but-still—carrying the echoes of history. This, in itself, is an important contemporary commentary on the processes of reconciliation in Australia today.

Seiver adopts a strategy of ‘modest retelling’ rather than making direct representations of personal trauma. It seems to me that the artist is taking a critical position, but that she does not wish to unveil something that is already known as a form of ideological critique. Art historian Susan Best has written extensively about the documentation of ‘shameful histories’ and the witnessing of trauma in the work of four contemporary female photographers<sup>14</sup>. Mobilising the ideas of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, (which are in turn interpretations of the theories of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein), Best contrasts ‘paranoid’ readings of artworks with ‘reparative’ aesthetics. In a paranoid reading, the object of shame is unveiled for all to see: it is re-presented. Such a strategy has been common in forms of modern art that takes an anti-aesthetic position and one would think that such ‘revealing’ would result in action and change. But what happens if pointing out the guilt of your viewer actually shuts down discussion and neutralizes emotional engagement? By pointing out the pain, do we actually forestall *taking action*? Does repeatedly revealing *the facts* in artworks render issues of injustice and identity impotent? This is a controversial argument. Even so, is an alternative, more complex response possible— and still effective?

In contrast to a paranoid reading, a reparative position signifies “a capacity to deal with ambivalence, and to incorporate both positive and negative feelings... [It] is not, then, simply about undoing or reversing damage; ambivalence precludes that wholly positive orientation”<sup>15</sup>. Artists working within a reparative framework mobilise places and stories in ways that both assimilate and problematize the consequences of violence and destruction, and hope for future change. Emotions are not estranged and frozen as narrow responses to shame. If one can tolerate ambiguity, then one can *carry* the burden of the past in a critical and *affective* way.

It is clear that Seiver does not follow the anti-aesthetic trajectory of the paranoid reading that dominates modern and contemporary art. In my interpretation, reparative aesthetics can include caring. The artist was invited by researcher Amanda Gardner to explore the issue of infanticide in colonial Western Australia in the group exhibition, *The spaces between us*. It is a subject that could have been received by viewers as being far removed in time and space from our present-day lives. In Seiver’s installation, *Adding absence (how to find 55 voices)* (2017), she has created a bonnet for each of the deaths as an act of bearing witness. Each bonnet is different — fashioned to tell an individual story. Each cap’s emptiness allows for the airing of the voices of others — giving space for the grief and sorrow to exist. The installation works accretively, as each bonnet becomes an activated object of memory, moving us emotionally, time and again. Each infant presence has its own stand that is welded onto a found object at its base. The rusted objects function to anchor the works in time but also puzzle us because of their varied domestic and rural origins. The work is open to “staying



*Domesticity* 2012  
80 x 70 x 10 cm  
Photo: Eva Fernandez

*Heartstrings* 2013  
350 x 145 x 145 cm  
recycled clothing and found timber  
Photo: Eva Fernandez

*Adding Absence* 2016  
Photo: Eva Fernandez

with the trouble<sup>16</sup>. In multiple ways Seiver has disarmed our initial reactions and entangled us in the work. She makes us think further and deeper into this historical tale.

Rust reminds us of the past. For Seiver, its attributes include echoes of age and climate and wear and tear. *Domesticity* (2012) was another small work in *Strangers in my Palace*. A battered sheet of tin with a blush of rust contains a thriftily-fashioned hole at its centre. It is a survivor from the Gold Rushes. The original function of its hole is unknown, but



it now frames a landscape of colourful blanket strips that remind us of beds of geological strata. The artist has added a lacy pattern of perforating holes. The assemblage represents many of Seiver's interests. It is hard and soft, warm and tarnished. It contains environment and home, recollection and cultural inheritance. Its intimate size brings us into proximity with the stories of others. *Domesticity* goes back in time and then reminds us of the continuity of these issues into the present.







Previous:  
*Sticks in my mind* 2011  
 183 peppermint sticks and torn printed text  
 dimensions variable  
 Photo: Eva Fernandez

*Et cor tuum de me* 2018  
 detail  
 found table cloth and crochet cotton  
 80 x 80 x 2 cm  
 Photo: Lloyd-Smith Photography

#### BY SHARON TASSICKER

I arrived at Helen Seiver's home and studio late on an autumn afternoon in March 2018. She met me at her front door and I entered her home through another 'home', her large sculptural *Heartstrings*, 2013, work. Immediately I felt doubly welcomed and comfortably at home with art visible everywhere.

Into the kitchen straight away, a cuppa on offer and a long sit down to talk. I had prepared a list of questions, having already looked carefully through her website and closely at her extensive CV. What had emerged for me was a picture of an intelligent, methodical, hardworking artist who'd planned her education to acquire the understandings and skills she needed to progress her practice in the direction it was taking her. This was an artist who'd taken advantage of the exposure and prize money available through art awards, city and regional, who'd been appreciated and collected. To date she had been represented in sixty-four group exhibitions and seven solo exhibitions. This was a well-rounded arts practice evidencing immense studio time, exhibitions, art prize entries, tertiary lecturing, artist in residence and regional youth arts residencies, children's art tutoring, work in prison, public art commissions and art consultancy. Totally impressive.

The other significant information I had was the artist statement on her website: *While primarily seeking to make sense of and broaden an understanding of my role as a contemporary female, my work also reflects the essential part women have played in determining the nature, shape and structure of female roles and identity. The various projects and progression of works endeavour to find processes with which to explore environmental and cultural issues and from a female perspective. They embrace themes of inherence (to be a natural and integral part of something) and cultural inheritance. Often using found objects, all chosen as signifiers of place and era, the works present an opportunity to observe and consider the notions being discussed: those of environment, home, and recollection.*

I wanted to explore that *essential part women have played* and the focus evident on environment, home and recollection. Particularly the *recollection*—what had she been collecting from the past? Memories? Materials?

Face to face with this quiet, unassuming woman with her friendly smile and sharp eyes I proceeded with my questions. I have paraphrased her answers with her approval.

**Q. Tell me about the process of recollection.**  
*A. Well, my mother had early onset Alzheimer's at the age of thirty-three. Not terribly noticeable for the first ten/fifteen years but eventually she was placed in care. She actually outlived my father by two years, who at the age of 62 was shot and killed by a young Aboriginal man while prospecting. I was twenty-eight at the time.*

Helen spoke at length about how she had been affected by these two circumstances that had shaped her and become driving forces for her practice. How she'd returned to find the mother she thought she'd lost, the mother she thought in many ways she hadn't had, through the materials and made things of the past, the skills she realised she had been taught by her mother, the knowledge she realised she'd been given about making a home, looking after a family, working with what was available and creating useful and beautiful things. Through the works she made, in particular *Heartstrings* 2013, she reconnected with her mother and found herself there. The meditation and incubation of making turned up things that shaped identity, both that of her 'absent' mother and of herself. Making the recent 2018 work *Et cor tuum de me* (the core of me) Helen found herself pulling threads

out of the fabric, creating spaces where she could contemplate her mother. A beautiful way of looking at the spaces left as containing what was, what did exist. Similarly, in the work *Adding Absence* 2016, the spaces created by the empty bonnets demonstrate what's missing and give us room to acknowledge those babies who did exist, to give them presence. To give full significance to what their absence meant to the mothers and to the society at large.

## THE MEDITATION AND INCUBATION OF MAKING TURNED UP THINGS THAT SHAPED IDENTITY, BOTH THAT OF HER 'ABSENT' MOTHER AND OF HERSELF.

In relation to the shocking incident that took her father's life and shaped the attitudes of her family thereafter, Helen found herself moving towards understanding. Working in the prison at Bunbury she found herself changing her attitude towards Aboriginal men and she began an investigation of what had led to the thus far inexplicable action that took her father's life. She found that the space left by the repression of the truth of our history in Western Australia had had a devastating effect on one young man who, having suddenly and shockingly confronted that true history, determined to take revenge. Helen herself has been filling the space containing the missing history, using the materials to make the art, to find the history, to find her father, to reconcile and heal and find peace.

I felt quite overwhelmed to share the heart of this artist, to hear of these major influences on her art making, to hear how she's expressed her identity through her art—it's her voice and it has shaped her. I reflected on all of this and moved on.

**Q. What is the process you go through? Does it start with the material?**

*A. Sometimes the materials and sometimes the idea. But, the materials are extremely important to the tell the story. I have used the same materials over thirty years, for the personal, the environmental and the political.*

And we did finally move out into the large studio where we were totally surrounded by materials, found and collected over the years and up until quite recently when the universe delivered rolls of old linoleum on the side of the road. This put together with wood offcuts looking like houses have made another work—*Smart timber* indeed!

I was reminded of the habits and processes of artists like Aadge Bruce, Stuart Elliott, John Parkes, Miriam Stannage and Theo Koning.

**Q. What work is most significant for you?**

*A. My work about home is most significant for me. The bonnets, Adding Absence 2016, is my best work.*

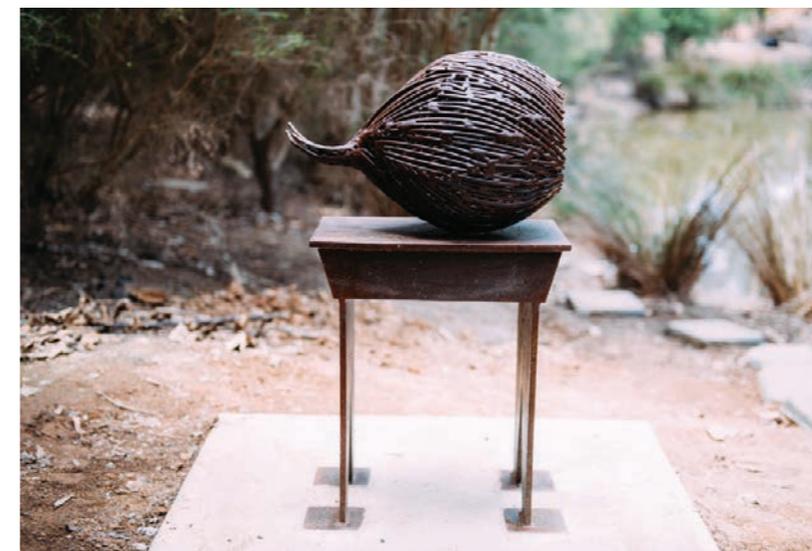
And I could see this quite clearly. The works about the home she's made, the home she was given, the wider home of the environment and society she's grown up in, all express her voice and that voice expresses what's important to her, what's valued, which is all that's contained within the materials, the ordinary made extraordinary, the loving and meticulous piecing together, the connections made, the meditative nature of repetitive work, and perhaps most importantly, the spaces left to reflect on

*@Home Series Jarrah*  
Photo: Elements Margaret River

*@Home Series Marri 2*  
Photo: Elements Margaret River

*@Home Series Blackbutt*  
70 x 50 x 40 cm  
welded steel

Photo: Elements Margaret River





Whose flag reinstalled  
This flag is my flag, This flag  
is your flag 2009  
detail

*Inflorescence series* 2015  
painted steel  
170 x 80 x 80 cm.  
Photo: Paul Webster



the honouring of woman's work and the considerations of 'Gross Domestic Product'.

**Q. I can see that the annual South West Surveys at Bunbury Regional Art Galleries have played a role in the development of your work.**

A. Yes, those surveys gave selected south-west artists opportunity to make something exceptional for a deadline. I need deadlines. It was a good award that drew attention to the work of artists living in the south-west of the state, and by that, I mean artists living south of the Perth metro area.

**Q. Have the works been chosen for your solo exhibition coming up in May at BRAG?**

A. We are bringing my works back together, but something interesting is happening in that I'm thinking to install installations differently, to add something ... bodies of works are having conversations, surprises are happening.

As we spoke we stopped to look at a large chest of drawers cosily blanketed in warm yellow and orange. Helen pulled out several of the drawers to show what precious things she'd placed in each. This prompted me to tell her of the idea I had to make portraits of people as cabinets, with each drawer or door opening to reveal a hidden part of themselves. With Helen, it's as if she has emptied out the drawers and cupboards of herself to reveal those intimate parts of herself to the world and to broaden her understanding of her role as a contemporary woman ranging across home, family, environment and wider political concerns.

I am looking forward with anticipation to seeing a wonderfully varied array of works in Helen's exhibition, in conversation with one another and with the viewers. I anticipate that I'll be surprised, moved and overwhelmed at the rich landscape of her life and the works produced over eighteen years. So many

instances of poignancy like *Marg's special*, 2014, *Conversations with my mother*, 2014, *Dying to be with you*, 2013, of honouring and beauty like *GDP*, 2016, *Domesticity*, 2014 and *Inflorescence Series (14)*, 2015 and of strength and social critique like *Traces*, 2007, *Whose Flag?*, 2009 and *Stakeholders*, 2007.

As I left and walked to the car a host of small kangaroos were quietly and happily eating the grass of the lawn. Surrounding farmers have fenced their properties to keep the kangaroos out. Despite the fact that they eat the rose buds and blooms and new leaves it seems that they are still allowed to be in this particular garden.



E N D N O T E S

- 1 Seiver, interview at the artist's home (February) and subsequent email correspondence February to March 2018.
- 2 Seiver has used these kinds of children's books from the 1920s to 1950s on a number of occasions in her art because of the way that they acted to create a false world view for children of the Empire: "of exploration in new lands as a great adventure, a conqueror's paradise"
- 3 See Sobin, Gustaf. *Luminous Debris: Reflecting on Vestige in Provence and Languedoc*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- 4 Brooks, Terri. "Rough and Ready: Makeshift, Abstraction and the Australian Patina." University of Ballarat, 2009, <http://innopac.ballarat.edu.au/record=b1542058>, page 2.
- 5 Seiver, op. cit.
- 6 Brooks, op. cit., page 28.
- 7 Seiver, op. cit.
- 8 Hawkins, Harriet, and Anja Kanngieser. "Artful Climate Change Communication: Overcoming Abstractions, Insensibilities and Distances." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 8.5 (2017) DOI: 10.1002/wcc.427.
- 9 O'Neill, Saffron, and Sophie Nicholson-Cole. "'Fear Won't Do It' Promoting Positive Engagement with Climate Change through Visual and Iconic Representations." *Science Communication* 30.3 (2009): 355-79 DOI: 10.1177/1075547008329201
- 10 Turcotte, Gerry. "Australian Gothic." *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*. Ed. Mulvey Roberts, Marie. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1998. 10-19.
- 11 Dagnall, Rebecca. "Rebecca Dagnall: Artist Statement." Monash Gallery of Art 2016. <http://mga.peptolab.com/bowness-prize/gallery/index/image/137/pp/24/pg/1>
- 12 Saddington, Roger. "Review: Arbor Temporis Momentum: Louiseann King." *Artlink* (2018). <http://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4652/arbor-temporis-momentum-louiseann-king/>
- 13 Kneebone, Sue, and Philip G Jones. *Naturally Disturbed*. Adelaide: SASA Gallery University of South Australia, 2010.
- 14 Turcotte, op. cit., page 11.
- 15 See in this volume: Tassicker, Sharon. "Kangaroos in the Garden." *Helen Seiver*. Bunbury, W.A.: Bunbury Regional Art Gallery, 2018.
- 16 Best, Susan. *Reparative Aesthetics: Witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography*. Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- 17 ibid. page 3.
- 18 c.f. Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Opposite:  
*Rescheduling Permanence*  
2014  
detail  
found timber, recycled  
plastic bags  
Photo: Eva Fernandez

Overleaf:  
*Smart Timber* 2018  
found timber & lino  
dimensions variable  
Photo: Lloyd Smith  
Photography





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