

## all things are water

‘I was swimming  
with the taste of apple  
in my mouth  
a shred of appleskin  
between my teeth I guess  
*It doesn't get any better than this*  
said the water  
*These are troubled times*  
said the shred  
and the apple, the apple  
wasn't really there,  
only a lingering taste of it’  
Mary Ruefle, ‘Apple in Water’, *mal Journal* (2019)

‘Water is something you cannot hold’, writes the poet Anne Carson in *Plainwater* (1995). It is an element always on the cusp of transformation (moving between vapour, liquid and ice), and what water may *mean* to any one of us is just as slippery.

*All things are water* takes water as its defining feature. Moving between video, installation, photography and painting, this exhibition rethinks water as an environment, as a site of escape, as an emotional state, as a contaminant, and as a metaphor for time and distance. But *all things are water* also acts as an elegy. That is, the works contained in this exhibition speak to the impending ecological crisis, and an Australian landscape increasingly defined by an absence of water rather than its surplus. I write this text as the NSW government introduces the toughest water restrictions we have seen in a decade.

I write this text as many towns will have no water by the end of the year.

I write this text as the state faces an unprecedented bushfire threat.

I write this text on the east coast of another country where rain clouds are not tricksters. When the forecast is for rain, it will rain, and it will do so every three to four days—a cycle that seems cruel in its regularity when set against this parched earth.

Yet the works in this exhibition speak to both loss and hope (often at the same time). Water, both as an element and as an idea, can do this: it can be violent/ charming/ hypnotic/ reinforcing/ and persistent; it can incite revolutions and blockades (‘We are water’ was the rallying cry for the Dakota Pipeline protests; ‘Be like Water’ is the slogan of the Hong Kong protest movement). And, for *all things are water*, it functions as a doorway or a hinge for thinking through our contemporary world.

### i. water as memorial

Water is stolen in the same way that this land was stolen and never ceded. *Used to be a river* (2019) sees Dale Collier, an artist of Wiradjuri and Northern European heritage, tracking the dry riverbed of the so-called Goulburn River (named by settlers after a British politician in the 1820’s). It is a river racked with the effects of irrigation, tributary re-direction, water theft, mining, and land misuse—all the result of colonisation. Collier’s work is at once an indictment, an act of mourning, and a claim for land reparation and renewal. ‘My ecology will thrive again/ And there’ll be no one around/ no one to farm them hooved animals’, writes Collier. ‘My banks will be clean/ And you’ll be gone.’ *Used to be a river* also counters the pervasive (and insidious) Western understanding of water as non-sentient. When does a river cease to be a river? In his journey,

Collier marks this river’s open wounds: the negative space that used to be filled.

While Collier’s riverbed is dry, Angela Tiatia’s *Lick* (2015) deals with immersion. It is the artist’s body that is engulfed—we watch Tiatia as she is swallowed by the tide. Like Collier’s landlocked canoe, the perspective in Tiatia’s video is disorientating. We remain underwater, looking up as the levels rise, instead of inhabiting a viewpoint beside or above her. Tiatia filmed this work in the waters of Tuvalu, an island already seeing the effects of rising sea levels. Although Tiatia’s work appears languid in its slowness, it is a sinister account of a region on the frontlines of ecological disaster. The ongoing violences of colonisation, Australia’s refusal to sign the agreement at the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum, and the potential destruction of land and culture haunts the edges of this work. These violences have infiltrated and mutated the ocean. The rhythms of the tide are not a comfort, but a warning.

### ii. water as Romantic ideal

Ellen Dahl’s *At the Edge of Place* (2019) sees a body of water transformed into a site of contamination. There is a stillness to this work: any flow or current has been cauterised, so the sickly green and black water sits in lethargic pools. This stasis is also apparent in Dahl’s construction of *At the Edge of Place*. Consisting of a selection of photographs of a human-made lake in Tasmania and its surrounding environment, Dahl has overlapped and merged each of these still frames together. The result is a video work that is less about motion and more about the subtle juxtapositions of multiple exposures. In focusing on a landscape marked by human intervention (refuse, decay and scars), Dahl highlights how ideas of ‘wilderness’ and ‘Nature’ exist only in our imagination.

If Dahl is challenging the Romantic presentation of an ideal Nature, Todd McMillan is similarly mining this history and reconfiguring it. Like much of his work, McMillan’s cloud studies directly reference the Romantic tradition. At first glance, it appears as if the figures and ships of a Turner painting have been excised, and all we are left with is a corner of sky—a collection of cumulus, cumulonimbus, and cirrostratus clouds. This is water suspended/ water on the edge/ water that has the potential to quench the earth but is yet to arrive. What does it mean to look at rain clouds in a time when we have no rain? McMillan’s works become images of longing, or mirages, or wish fulfilment fantasies, instead of reality.

Alongside this series of clouds are two video works: *Elegy* (2019) and *Homage (study)* (2013). Whereas McMillan’s cloud studies deal with water as vapour, these video works consider water in its other states—there is the quiet threat of a panning Antarctic icescape, and the thrashing and chop of the Tasman ocean. *Homage (study)* sees the artist kayaking towards the sun, the effort of the oars jarring against the lack of progress. The horizon tips wildly. Placed in the context of the climate emergency, McMillan’s tragi-comic paddling becomes a metaphor for our own sense of futility and inaction.

### iii. water as infinite time

But what of the water that sits at the end of a comet’s tail, or the deposits found on Mars that may possess bacteria and therefore, signs of extra-terrestrial life? Michaela Gleave turns her gaze skyward, considering the cosmic ocean of the universe and our own internal oceanic rhythms. *The Radius of Infinity* (2019) is a site-specific installation that fills The Lock-Up’s courtyard with mist. As light makes its way through these water droplets, rays bounce and reflect off one another, transforming the vapour into stars. The light pulses with a hidden message. Its sequence is made up of Morse code signals that spell out an equation—a calculation describing the maximum impact

any one event can have on the universe. Gleave’s installation toys with a Romantic notion of science, and the ways in which the play of water can act as both salve and messenger.

Tom Blake’s *loop (II)* (2019) sits in tandem with Gleave’s work in that it similarly uses water as a site for abstract ideas. The second iteration in a series of works, *loop (II)* draws on the domestic everyday-ness of the shower and transforms this experience into a meditation on circular time. The stream of water does not end, but loops back in on itself. Our perception is blurred—is that a body, a drain, a tap?—while the sound of running water bounces off the walls. In presenting this eternal-return via three phone screens, the view is semi-private, partitioned and contained, in the way that a shower cubicle (or a cell window) is semi-private, partitioned and contained. What you are experiencing inside the cell *is* a shower, although the shower faucet is conspicuous by its absence.

### iv. water as poem

Some bodies of water are sites of freedom; some bodies of water are sites of movement and escape; some bodies of water are walls or borders. Talia Smith’s *Tākerere (Blacken or Make Darker)* (2019) is a story, a video-poem that tells the narrative of Smith’s grandmother. It is a story told by mother to daughter: a history remembered. The video consists of overlaid images of the Tasman Sea—those recorded by Smith in Sydney, Australia and those recorded by her mother in Auckland, New Zealand. As these horizon lines judder, congregate, and tremble, they come to represent the barriers and boundaries of distance. It is the distance of a vast ocean, but also the distance of time, of memory, of intergenerational lines.

For *water is...* (2019), Hannah Jenkins moves into the digital space. Instead of occupying a gallery wall, Jenkins’ infinite text lives online, perpetually generating itself down the screen. Jenkins’ text (and the code behind it) takes as its referent the phrase ‘water is’, and then completes this phrase by collating text from news sources (published between July and August 2019). The result is a work that is poetic, melancholic, political, and satirical. Some sentences twist themselves into metaphors or allegories, others are more literal. Jenkins is asking the question: what is the digital substance of water? What does the language of liquid look like online? There is also a speculative component here—the prospect of water becoming completely artificial. And while *water is...* is infinite, it remains in the present tense. This present exists in perpetuity, even as it is being recalibrated.

Jenkins’ stream of online text re-inscribes the premise of *all things are water*. That is, it suggests how the language of water often functions as a starting point, its metaphorical and literal implications spiralling outward: water is sacred/ water is life/ water is unsafe to drink/ water is necessary/ water is rationed. And, viewed against the backdrop of a years-long drought, and amid the desperate warnings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, water is now a rarity: a dream-substance, an imagined thirst-quencher whose existence we can no longer rely on.

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