



LISS FENWICK

*Natural History Of Destruction*

*Natural history of destruction* examines historical narratives of European settlement in Northern Australia. This exhibition brings together photographs of sites where history weighs heavily on the landscape: 'Larrakia Land' scratched into a tree following the historic Kenbi land claim, a midden of colonial-era glass, and a tree disfigured by a fence at an abandoned World War II army base. These images of past traumas are shown alongside occurrences of the turbulent tropical environment: ancient warring between termites and trees, and the termite cathedrals built for protection from the climate.

The title is drawn from *On the Natural History of Destruction* by W.G. Sebald, which examines the moral implications of World War II on German society. This exhibition is influenced by Sebald to consider Australia's ongoing failure to reconcile a morally discredited colonial mindset. Collectively, these images are a protest against the willful forgetting of the problematic elements of Australian history.

Liss Fenwick is a visual artist based on Larrakia land in the Northern Territory, where they were born and raised, and Naarm (Melbourne). They are undertaking a Ph.D. at RMIT University, Melbourne, and were awarded the prestigious Macquarie Group Emerging Artist Prize in 2018.

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23 October - 28 November

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## Memory and Redemption

'genuine memory must yield an image of the person who remembers' - Benjamin

In the triptych *Tidal Glass Drift* beer bottles shine in the weak light. A fleeting moment of the day in which they reveal themselves from an otherwise undifferentiated landscape. The dry bed is waiting for the tide to swell, which when it comes will erode and augment this floating signifier of the town Wyndham, WA. Fading from the sand are footprints and the sinew of a motorbike track reaching out into the distance. The midden of bottles and rubbish in varying states of dissolution is a *lieu de memoire* of a world barely perceived. In *Natural History of Destruction* Liss Fenwick is concerned with the cultural memory of place across Northern Australia and discloses the mutual process of remembering and forgetting.

Pierre Nora theorised memory sites '*lieux de mémoire*' as conduits between memory and history. *lieux de mémoire* are places, commemorations, celebrations that are given symbolic aura. For Nora modern western societies require the mediation of memory through places and objects because of an inability for the direct inheritance of identity through traditions. Modernity and the unfurling of the new cuts the individual from continuity and unmoor the values by which one lives. Memory sites are a crutch by which identity is borne but this identity remains equivocal as they are consciously and unconsciously upheld and commemorated. Nora writes there is an "unconscious organisation of collective memory that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness"<sup>1</sup>. These sites express a will to remember and conversely their neglect and elision speak of a desire to forget. In her work Fenwick upholds the responsibility of remembering and interpreting. She seeks to understand the significance of the space, gestures and objects of a world whose driving principle -- colonialism -- and its extractive and instrumental logic -- has been discredited. *Lieux de mémoire* are a resort for settler Australians who lack the enduring memory and connection of First Nations people to land. Fenwick is interested in the folds of history and those elements that are obscured through time but remain latent - for as much as they are repressed the threat of their appearance remains.

The exhibition takes its title from W.G Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* in which he addresses the silence of German society after the targeted bombing of German cities and their civilian populations during World War Two. This event, which was at most understood as retribution for the greater evil of Germany's actions in the war, was rinsed from the consciousness of the population, so that the surrounding scene of total destruction did not register. Instead a collective injunction "pointing the population exclusively towards the future and enjoining on it silence about the past"<sup>2</sup> prevailed. Sebald's work follows the contours of history in a narrative that is interrupted and complicated by false turns and the contingency that things could have been otherwise. He writes in *Rings of Saturn* that the representation of history requires a "falsification of perspective"<sup>3</sup> and that we are unable to reach an ultimate vantage point. In light of this Sebald foregrounds the subjectivity of his recollections and the biographical

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* p 23

<sup>2</sup> W.G. Sebald *On the Natural History of Destruction* p 7

<sup>3</sup> W.G. Sebald *Rings of Saturn* p 125

connections his texts make between objects and events across time and space. The narrative of history is an expression of both perspective and will and remains mutable, as much as it is treated as *if* it were Natural History. The terms perspective and will bring us close to Nietzsche's philosophy whose influence also runs through Fenwick's work. The influence is referenced in titles of works *Übermensch lol*, *Snake Creek Armament Depot* and *der Wille zur Macht* and more fundamentally in the exhortation to use *history for life*, to support the "force of growing in a different way out of oneself, of reshaping and incorporating the past and the foreign, of healing wounds, compensating for what has been lost"<sup>4</sup>. Fenwick continues the line of thinking from Sebald and Nietzsche that there is a cost to life in the refusal to reflect and incorporate the unpleasantness of history; of neglecting the complexity of trauma caused by the destruction of colonialism.

Fenwick's work expresses this in an uneasy beauty. She is aware of the stakes involved in the images, and with a Nietzschean directness comes at you the viewer. The subject most frequently fills the image from the foreground, lit with flash in the transitional twilight. The subjects are monumental and individual. Your eyes are directed but are then struck by the uncanny enigma of the representation - the symbolism remains unresolved. In *Übermensch lol* the barbed wires of a fence are engulfed by the blackened trunk of a tree. It's location at a former military installation is another neglected *lieu de mémoire*, a site active during World War Two and during the *Indonesian Confrontation* of the 60s. The form of the tree is monumental, a triple crucifix the extent of its growth can't be gathered. The obscured branch leading to the top right of the image may be of the same tree but you can't be sure. The six stubby branches resemble enclosed wounds. I am disinclined to narrativise the image as a story of nature overcoming the human, for Fenwick troubles the relationship between the natural and the human. Nature appears obdurate, contested and difficult, but not the source of moral lessons for we cannot live like ants. In *Road Side Fruit Stand* the ant plunges itself into the abyss. Its success and tenacity haunts our doubts. So too in *Nuptial Flight* insects pursue their own interests untroubled by human designs. Winged ants gather on a termite mound adorned with a hat from Fenwick's family business 'Humpty Doo Pumps'. The image has the form of a *non sequitur* and its absurdity has a humor that complicates any flat didacticism.

At Mandorah, carved into a mahogany tree reads *Larrakia Land*. The surface of the introduced tree is mottled. A series of Xs run down the tree and higher up there appear names and idle shapes. Although it is beginning to fade back into the bark; the declaration that you are on Larrakia Land is resolute. The Larrakia are the traditional owners of the Darwin region. Native title was first asserted *officially* by the Larrakia in 1979 and continued for over four decades with the handing back of land on the Cox Peninsula and adjoining reefs and islands eventuating in 2016. The Mandorah boat ramp and jetty faces Darwin from across the harbour at the top of the Cox Peninsula. Boat ramps make for odd of meeting places; a stilted mix of the curious and the aloof. As part of the settlement of the land claim the NT Government negotiated continued public access to fishing and beaches on the peninsula. One reads the inscription in light of the

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* p 3

recent return of land, as both a proud self-assertion and a reminder to fishermen and other visitors that the contest over history has transformed.

Fenwick is interested in the impact of actions that are made without the reassurance of a belief in their purpose. Her work draws us back into unresolved debates of modernity, the place of history and progress, subjectivity, and community. Fenwick has an unending curiosity of how people live their lives and the unfathomable reasons for why. In light of the lack of grounding of our experience it is unresolved what form redemption can take in Fenwick's work. Perhaps this is the jarring use of beauty. We are not yet far enough along to look forward to the future - first we must look into the beautiful abyss.

*Damien Laing*  
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