

Liminal Space

Jenny Mulcahy

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Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts

Our world is in the midst of a mass extinction of life with scientists estimating that globally we lose 150-200 species of plant, insect, bird and mammal every 24 hours. *Liminal Space* explores issues of extinction and de-extinction while questioning those political decisions that place our environment in jeopardy!



“The word liminality is derived from the Latin word ‘limen’, meaning threshold, and closely associated with the word ‘limes’, meaning limit. Unlike a limit, a threshold is not an end point but a mid point, that allows fluid crossing of, or wavering between two worlds... the liminal phase...[is] a space of transformation where the human being is between past and future identities and anything can happen, [if] fed the imaginative power...”¹ writes Judith Westerveld.

In a critical time when disinformation and political double-speak polarises our society, Jenny Mulcahy holds us a space for us, a space at this threshold – a ‘liminal space’. She removes ambiguity while illuminating fragments of beauty in our broken ecosystem.

Liminal Space is a creative archive and a testament to the moment in which we find ourselves. It is also a call to action. The artist utilises the white cube of the gallery to suspend time – providing audiences with a quiet space. She removes the noise and rhetoric that dissociate us from the reality of our end-game Anthropocene epoch², providing clarity and insisting on accountability.

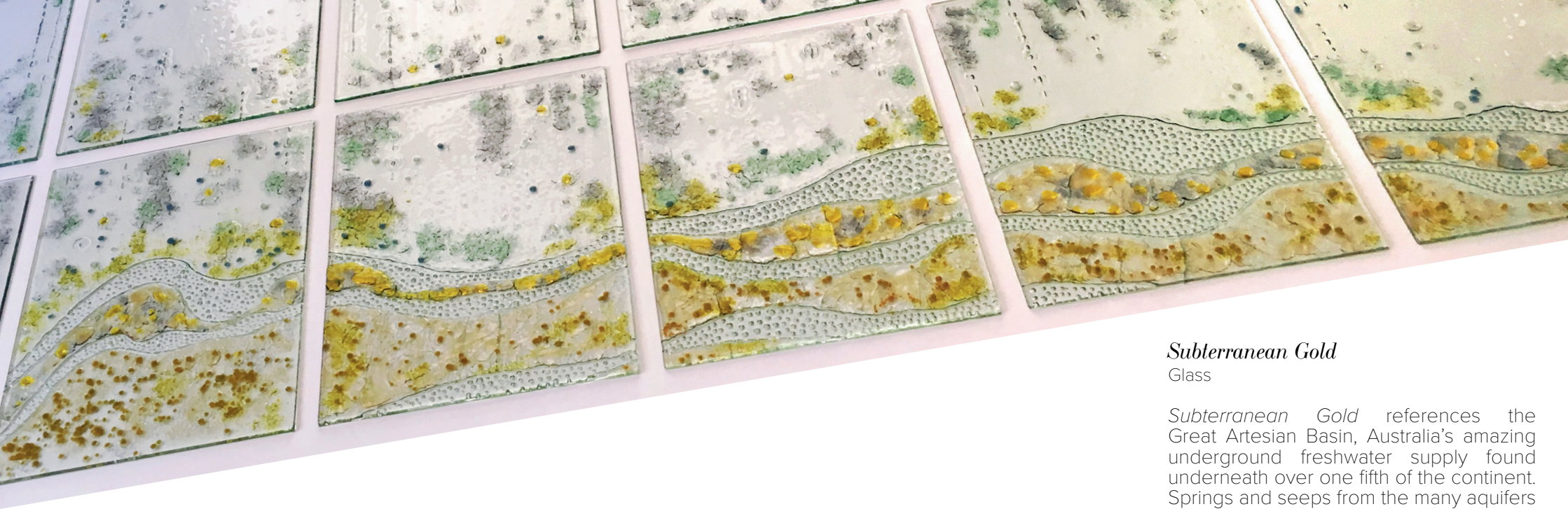
Mulcahy has a history of uncovering ‘the object’ and using it to educate and advocate for social, political and environmental concerns.³ The rigour of her studio practice is evident in the command of mediums she employs. In *The Gone*, Mulcahy recreates seven birds’ nests containing the eggs of extinct avian species presented in the trappings of a museum display. So precise is the rendering of the eggs that their fragility is palpable.



On the opposite end of the spectrum another image comes to mind. I am reminded of Scott Morrison’s theatrical overture in 2017, when he brought a lump of coal to federal parliament and declared it nothing to be scared of, merely “good clean sustainable energy!” In fact the coal was fixed with hairspray so it wouldn’t dirty his hands.⁴ (Orwellian double-speak has so proliferated our channels of information in the social media age – the distrust of any information is becoming common.) It is no coincidence that a Liberal politician is supportive of coal mining energy. Mining magnate Gina Rinehart is known to be a big supporter and influencer of Liberal policy as well as climate change denier lobby group action.⁵

The entanglement of politics, government and private wealth has placed us in an enduring extraction economy with a resulting eco-genocide. Mulcahy does not shy away from seeking personal accountability of compromised political leaders in *Collusion (Trough Series)*. In this work, Mulcahy, reduces notable politicians and Australian billionaires (including Rinehart) to the diminutive size of the vulnerable Black Throated Finch (who are on the verge of extinction). In this, the artist echoes many folklores where greed and other societal transgressions are punished by transforming the offenders into ‘lowly’ animals.

We are at a threshold, as Mulcahy points out. There is fatigue as the public’s calls for change fall on defiantly deaf ears. Simon Springer, a long-time critical proponent of our current economic system, previously very stayed in his writing, is at his wits end and wrote a paper this year titled *Fuck Neoliberalism*. He said, “I decided that I wanted to transgress, to upset, and to offend, precisely because we ought to be offended by neoliberalism. It is entirely upsetting, and therefore we should ultimately be seeking to transgress it.”⁶



Subterranean Gold

Glass

Subterranean Gold references the Great Artesian Basin, Australia's amazing underground freshwater supply found underneath over one fifth of the continent. Springs and seeps from the many aquifers within the Basin have enabled Aboriginal peoples to live in dry inland areas for more than 40,000 years whilst maintaining cultural, social and spiritual connections with those springs and the life that they support.

Today the Basin remains a vital resource for 120 towns, 7,600 businesses and 180,000 people.² Despite differing geological and scientific theories as to the formation of these aquifers, it is acknowledged that a number of seeps and bores have run dry and that in others there has been a reduced water flow. Many of these have been capped in an effort to reduce the water loss. Some geologists, such as Professor Lance Endersbee³, believe the water supply to be finite, our rainfall not capable of replenishing the water reserves. In spite of this, State and Federal Governments continue to give approval to industries for the extraction of coal seam gas, open cut and underground coal mining, all of which require a huge amount of water and continually pose the threat of contamination to the aquifers with toxic runoff going into waterways.

A continuous growth and extraction economy is not viable. Mulcahy is, in essence, seeking an alternative, a care economy – caring for Country and people. This kind of economy existed in Australia, managed by the First Nations peoples, for tens of thousands of years prior to colonial contact.

Kate O'Hara

Director, Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts

References (pages 2-4).

1. Judith Westerveld, *Liminality In Contemporary Art*, (n.p., 2010), [http://www.judithwesterveld.nl/text/FINAL%20VERSION%20THESIS%20\(compressed\).pdf](http://www.judithwesterveld.nl/text/FINAL%20VERSION%20THESIS%20(compressed).pdf), accessed August 2020.
2. "Anthropocene Epoch, unofficial interval of geologic time, making up the third worldwide division of the Quaternary Period (2.6 million years ago to the present), characterized as the time in which the collective activities of human beings (Homo sapiens) began to substantially alter Earth's surface, atmosphere, oceans, and systems of nutrient cycling." John Rafferty, "Anthropocene Epoch", Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed August 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Anthropocene-Epoch>.
3. Jenny Mulcahy's exhibition *Beyond Borders* at Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts in 2011 is a fine example of this. Her ceramic and mixed media works explored the universal emotional connections to place and to the seemingly mundane objects of daily life.
4. "The coal was produced as a totem of how the government in Canberra was going to keep the lights on, and keep power prices low, and stop the relentless march of socialism, or prevent random thought crimes against base-load power stations."
5. Katharine Murphy, "Scott Morrison brings coal to question time: what fresh idiocy is this?", The Guardian, 9 February 2017, accessed August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/feb/09/scott-morrison-brings-coal-to-question-time-what-fresh-idiocy-is-this>.
6. Graham Readfearn, "Billionaire Mining Magnate Gina Rinehart Revealed As Key Donor to Australian Climate Science Denial Promoter Institute of Public Affairs", Desmog, published 17 July 2018, accessed August 2020, <https://www.desmogblog.com/2018/07/17/billionaire-mining-magnate-gina-rinehart-revealed-key-donor-australian-climate-science-denial-promoter-institute>.
6. Simon Springer, *Fuck Neoliberalism: Translating Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020).



Trough Series

Steel, ceramic, found items

The three works that make up the *Trough Series* reference the Galilee Basin, one of the largest known coal reserves in the world, which is located in central Queensland.

The first in the series, entitled *The Galilee*, depicts the endangered Black throated finch, whose grassy woodland habitat was situated atop the proposed mine where a specific grass, whose seeds it feeds upon, grows. When the Federal and State Governments granted approval for Adani's Carmichael coal mine they also opened the way for the destruction of the bird's habitat and environment, as well as local farmlands and the cultural heritage of the region's Traditional Owners.



The second trough in the series, *Collusion*, references the huge political power that big mining companies wield and the lack of integrity to be found in environmental impact studies (and their implementation), with numerous politicians at all levels of government willing to do deals with mining companies. With the go-ahead being given to Adani, other companies with leases in the area (like Gina Rinehart's company GVK Hancock and Clive Palmer's Waratah Coal) are more confident of gaining approvals. The Waratah Coal mine would put the Bimblebox Nature Reserve under a huge environmental threat.

The third trough, *Nemesis*, represents that which will catch us up unless we and our politicians ensure that care of our environment is paramount in every situation. Since European settlement we have destroyed so very, very much of what is good and beautiful; we have made extinct or endangered so many animals, birds and plants; and conducted the Maralinga nuclear tests which left many Indigenous people cut off from their lands, unable to return due to contamination. And still there is more... Bad water management of what used to be the mighty Murray River, ditto the Darling River at Menindee causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of fish, the leaching of toxic waste from NT mines into waterways, our own carbon emissions and export of coal contributing to global warming, which impacts so greatly on our reefs, etcetera, etcetera.

The Gone

Ceramic and found materials

In December 2019 a group of researchers from Charles Darwin University, Charles Sturt University and the A.N.U verified that 100 endemic Australian species from 1788 to the present became extinct. However, they noted that many extinctions have not been officially registered and many more species disappeared before their existence was recorded. The researchers speculate that actual tolls would be about 10 times greater than the 100 derived from official lists.⁴

The Gone explores seven of the 24 birds officially listed as extinct, from one of the smallest, the Robust white-eye (*Zosterops strenuous*) to the King Island dwarf emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae minor*). The Robust white-eye, along with at least six other avian extinctions, was believed to be the result of the introduction of rats following the grounding of the SS Makambo in June 1919. The King Island dwarf emu was hunted to extinction, with the last remaining two dying in captivity in Paris in 1822. The Kangaroo Island emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae baudinianus*) and the White gallinule (*Porphyrio albus*) were also hunted to extinction, with the emu extinct by 1827 and the gallinule by 1834.

When creating the eggs and nests for this series of work, my desire was to replicate (as near as possible), the type of nest and colour, size and shape of both egg and clutch for each species of bird represented. This I have done where possible, however relevant information was much sparser for some species and in those instances creativity has ruled.

Turdus poliocephalus vinitinctus

Lord Howe Thrush
Extinct 1924

Rhipidura cervina

Lord Howe Fantail
Last recorded 1924

Lewinia pectoralis clelandi

Western Lewin's rail
Last reported sighting 1932

Porphyrio albus

White gallinule
Extinct 1834

Dromaius novaehollandias minor

King Island emu, dwarf emu
Extinct 1822

Zosterops strenuous

Robust white-eye
Extinct 1923

Turdus poliocephalus poliocephalus

Norfolk Island thrush, grey headed blackbird
Extinct 1975



Project: Restore

Steel and ceramic

Like our King Island dwarf emus that died in Paris, many other species suffered the same fate, being sent as either live or stuffed specimens to natural history museums around the world including those in Florence, Vienna, Liverpool, Leiden, Tring, U.K., Berlin, New York, Paris and Washington. Specimens are also held in a number of collections in Australia. It is from these types of collections that the possibility of resurrecting extinct species using genetic technology and DNA from museum samples has caught scientific and public interest. The mixed media work *Project: Restore* contains museum samples from extinct Australian species for the extraction of DNA samples to enable initial development of de-extinction strategies.



Keeping you safe

Ceramic, steel and timber

Rather than restoring the extinct, I'd much rather we put conservation strategies in place to preserve those 464 species of Australian fauna⁵ that are currently critically endangered or vulnerable, for which the possibility of extinction is a reality. The mixed media work *Keeping you safe* is a response to all those who vilify and become frenzied at the mere mention of a bat. Tragically, of the 77 bat species in Australia, 43 are identified as being locally or nationally threatened by habitat loss, inappropriate fire regimes, drought and heat waves.

References (pages 1, 5-11).

1. John Vidal, "Protect nature for world economic security, warns UN biodiversity chief", *The Guardian*, published August 17, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/aug/16/nature-economic-security>.
2. Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, "Great Artesian Basin", Australian Government, reviewed 7 July 2020, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/water/national/great-artesian-basin>.
3. Lance Endersbee, "Great Artesian Basin: Scientific Papers", Great Artesian Basin Protection Group Inc, 2018, <https://www.gabpg.org.au/scientific-papers/>.
4. John Woinarski et al., "Scientists Re-Counted Australia's Extinct Species. And the Result Is Devastating", *Live Science*, published December 2, 2019, <https://www.livescience.com/australia-extinct-species-devastating.html>. The study this article was based on was originally published at *The Conversation*. The publication contributed the article to *Live Science's Expert Voices: Op-Ed & Insights*.
5. Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, "EPBC Act List of Threatened Fauna", Australian Government, 2009, <https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl>

Texts

Catalogue essay by Kate O'Hara. | All other texts by Dr Jenny Mulcahy.

Images

Front: Jenny Mulcahy, *The Gone* (detail); *Robust White eye*, Ceramic and found plant matter, variable dimensions. | **Pages 1-2:** Jenny Mulcahy, *Trough series #2 Collusion* (detail), Ceramic, steel and found materials, variable dimensions. **Pages 3-4:** Jenny Mulcahy, *Subterranean Gold*, Glass, 103 x 243 x 0.6cm. | **Pages 5-6:** Jenny Mulcahy, *Trough series #1 The Galilee* (detail), Ceramic, steel and found materials, variable dimensions. | **Page 8 top:** Jenny Mulcahy, *The Gone* (detail); *Western Lewin's rail*, Ceramic and found plant matter, variable dimensions. | **Page 8 bottom:** Jenny Mulcahy, *The Gone* (detail); *Norfolk Island thrush, grey headed blackbird*, Ceramic and found plant matter, variable dimensions. | **Page 9:** Jenny Mulcahy, *Keeping you safe*, Specimen box, bones, ceramic, variable dimensions. | **Page 10:** Jenny Mulcahy, *Project Restore*, Ceramic and steel, variable dimensions. | **Back:** Jenny Mulcahy, *Trough series #3 Nemesis* (detail), Ceramic, steel and found materials, variable dimensions.

Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts

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