

Kay S Lawrence's interdisciplinary art practice critically engages with anthropological, physical and spiritual aspects of her surroundings. From within a feminist paradigm she investigates the shifting boundaries of nature and culture, developing parameters and perspectives that help us understand our place in the world and the fragile and ephemeral nature of both life and time. She moves from two dimensional and three dimensional works through performative photographic works to create works that reference an anthropocentric society. In 2014 Lawrence was awarded a PhD from Griffith University for her thesis *Material Matters: Contemporary Women's Work*.

kaylawrence.net



Material Matters

Kay S Lawrence

We walked the tree circle before stepping inside. It was another time, out of the world. We were younger, we were older — we were together. We heard the wind, the sky, the leaves, the earth, and all of the birds and creatures who lived there. And we were part of it.

Inga Simpson, *Where the trees were*
Hatchette Australia, 2016: p.12.

Cover: Liminal Being (2014)
Tree Line (2012)

Dancing with Shadows

By Louise Martin-Chew

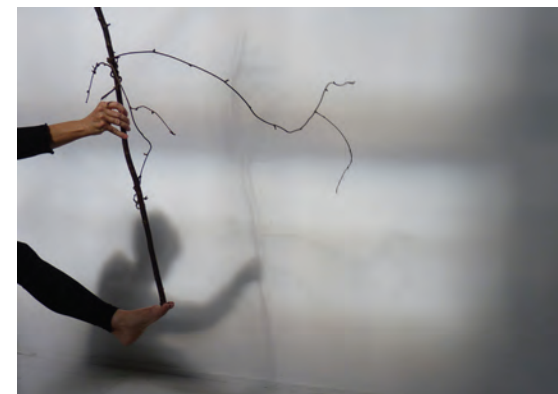
Inga Simpson's novel *Where the trees were* (2016) follows the narrative of a non-Indigenous woman after the loss of Wiradjuri burial trees (arborglyphs) from where she grew up in New South Wales. She evokes her own shame at the dearth of knowledge and understanding about the existence and importance of these trees which have almost completely disappeared since Australia's colonisation. Carved as 'grave trees', they marked the burial places of Aboriginal elders, with designs that traced the individual's life journey and signposted a way to the Dreamtime.

Kay S Lawrence's artistic explorations of nature, trees, and her own journey have something of the same melancholy and irrevocable sense of loss as the Simpson novel. For Lawrence, who came to art after a fully-fledged life as an accountant, businesswoman and mother, her rapid progress as an artist seems built on intensity, possibly fuelled by a desire to make up lost time. Her subject matter has been carved through to the place she finds herself as a mature talent. She started with domesticity and housework, underpinned with feminist ideology. Then a visit to the S21 prison in Cambodia saw her segue into examining incarceration and social justice issues. However, ever since she found herself making work about the natural environment, the connections between living things, and the increasingly urgent place in which we find ourselves as a global community, she notes, "I haven't got past that. It is a cause".

Material Matters brings together recent work (from 2011) which draws on a lifetime of creating with textiles, Lawrence's more recent training in art (to doctorate level in 2014), overlaying it with experiences of artist residencies and travel since 2008 in places from Peel Island, Queensland (2010), Beijing (2010), Aomoto, Japan (2012), Philadelphia in the USA (2012), to Kunming, China (2013). On these cultural journeys, she has travelled light (with a camera), using her body, found materials, space and light to create work that she describes as "awkward", in that it doesn't fit into known genres or criteria for established prizes. It is, however, thoroughly contemporary in its use of available resources to create personal, intriguing and powerful work on universally understood and increasingly urgent ecological themes.

For example, *Separation Anxiety* (2014) is a photographic image with shadows on a white wall, a figure to the left, truncated by the camera, holding the branch of a tree. The photograph captures an impromptu performance inspired by a huge white-walled warehouse in which Lawrence was working during her residency in Japan. It was her dance, interacting alone, organically, poetically, with the shadow and the tree. The sparse aesthetic of this image is powerful, the solo performer a presence on equal terms with the branch and the shadow entity (a union of both).

Separation Anxiety (2014)



Trees, whether visible or not, are central to her work, which extends the connection for me to the Simpson novel. Other images such as *Varicose* (2011) draw the analogy between the human body and the spidery interconnections of trees, with the sense of dis-ease created with its unnatural colouration. *Pandanus Princess* (2011) frames body parts that focus on a vignette that may read as a vagina surrounded by phallic extensions. Anthropomorphic references are integral, with trees becoming bodies and trees again. *Hold me close, Hold me closer* and *Hold me again* (all 2011) begin as an image of a tree trunk, the same image bleached out in the second, and then embroidered in the third, as Lawrence traverses the subject through photography into “drawing with thread” and in so doing conducting a journey from veracity to reconstruction.

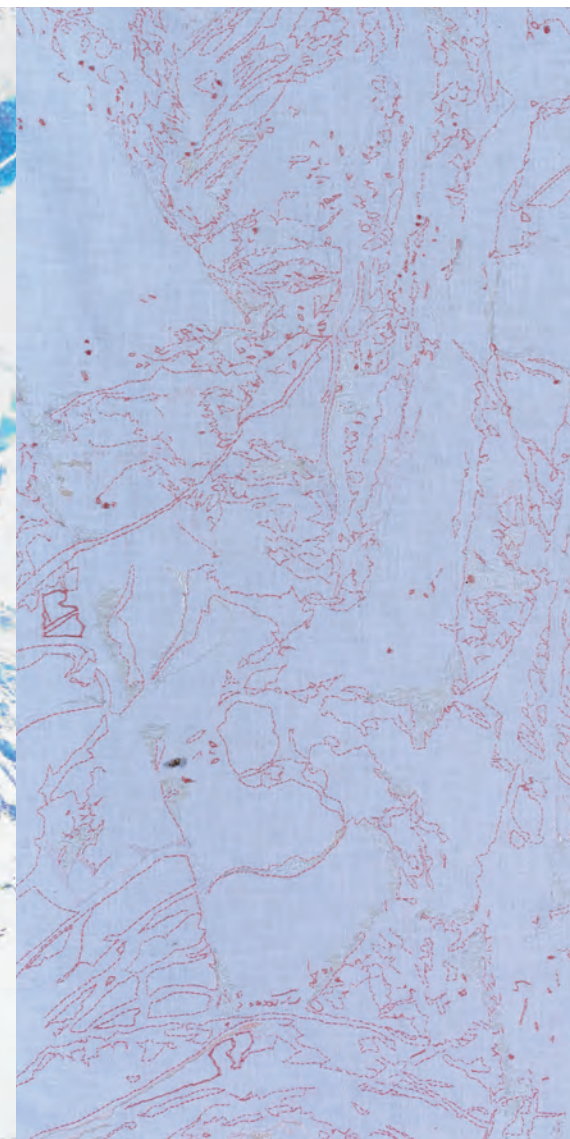
This work renegotiates the relationship between nature and culture, with conceptual and physical connections evoking the potential devastation of new weather patterns that may be inevitable. Yet the work Lawrence creates across all media has an ethereal, will-o'-the-wisp lightness in materiality and effect. Natural found objects, particularly trees, are conjoined with embroidery or knitting, using these traditional feminine crafts to graft humanity onto nature. *Liminal Being* (2014) sees a branch-like assembly extended with rubber, wire, wool, cotton and acrylic yarns to hybridise the form, with coral-like growths knitted onto its arms, exploding octopus-like from the central stem, placing it within a continuum. These sculptural works extend the connections set up by the photographs toward a three-dimensional form that may be natural or human, but is most likely none, metamorphosing toward another entity altogether.



Hold me close (2011)



Hold me closer (2011)



Hold me again (2011)

(Wo)mangrove and Re/cology#1 are an installation of a mangrove branch with a knitted textile draped over a crooked trunk, paired with a larger, similarly white fabric pinned to the wall. Ragged edges extend from its hem while embroidery and threads create calligraphic drawings. A truncated arm, the other element with straighter lines, constructs an image which might be a torso. Highly abstracted, its indistinct formation is a tease, an enigmatic pair for its organic mangrove friend.

Similarly enigmatic and evocative of emotion and loss is *Engagement with...#2*. A large piece of calico hangs free in the middle of the gallery space, a rod offering a straight horizontal support. Below this an image in pink is sketched with sewing, wings outstretched, a horizontal line of flesh-coloured threads cascading from its core, to extend in tendrils across the gallery floor. These tendrill-threads may be tears, blood or sorrow, but remain anchored to the floating canvas, aching for release.

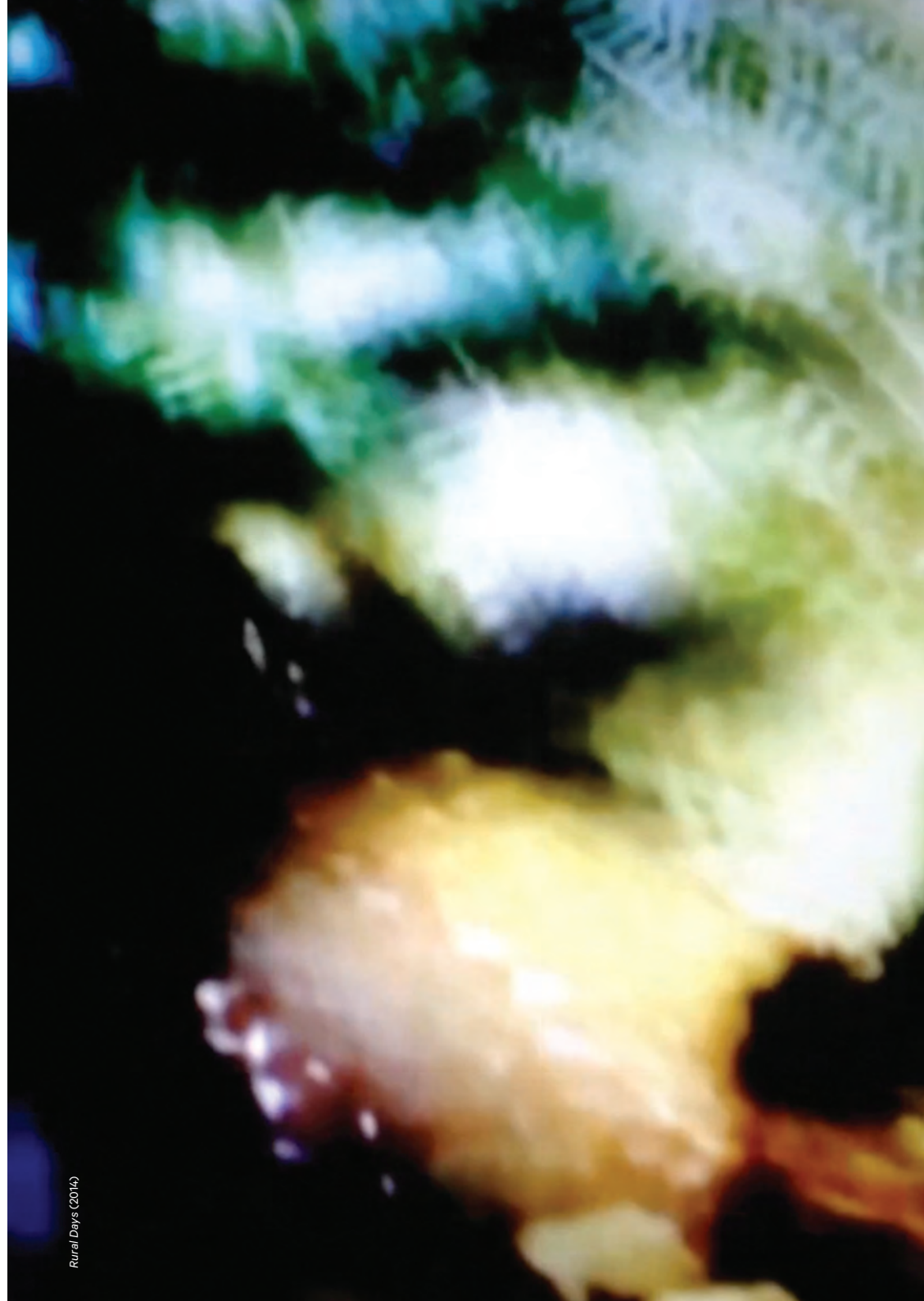


(Wo)mangrove (2014)

Video is an intrinsic part of *Material Matters*, each work a meditative vignette on an experience or transition. While they may focus on an immediate response to natural environments — birds calling, shadowy shapes in the sky, droplets in water — they are also resonant with presences of the almost seen, flashes of humanity within nature. These allusions conjure the unknown and unknowable forces that have always perplexed humanity with alternative possibilities that catch at the imagination. Others, like *Squeaky Sand*, capture a foundational memory — feet squeaking in sand — often amongst the early and notable physical and sensory experiences that connect us to the earth.

Lawrence is an urban dweller, resident in inner city Brisbane for some decades, amongst the local fauna of possums and bush turkeys, and tending vegetable gardens and fruit trees. Yet her father's background was on the land, and her childhood between regional Queensland and New South Wales is visible in the evident familiarity and ease with the landscape that these works capture — and mourn.

Material Matters and its elements are infiltrated with global insecurity, environmental cataclysm, and personal sorrow. Like Simpson's discomfort about the loss of such significant cultural heritage for her Aboriginal friends (and also for herself), so is Lawrence's pain for the future of the earth made manifest in these works, not through didacticism but empathetic engagement.



Rural Days (2014)



anthropocentric

adjective an · thro · po · cen · tric \
an(t)-thrə-pə-'sen-trik \

1: considering human beings as the most significant entity of the universe

2: interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences

Bound (2012)

Interwoven

By Lisa Bryan-Brown

The heartbreak inspired by paying witness to environmental devastation is particular; seething anger enmeshed with yearning powerlessness; grieving for the lost landscape; grasping for someone to blame; mourning for the ruinous future that must inevitably follow such wanton destruction.

Borne of these emotions, Kay S Lawrence's practice embraces metaphor as a means to translate and consider the causes and outcomes of people's rampant disregard for ecology. Oscillating between textile, performance and digital mediums, Lawrence's work utilises process as both a means and an end, a way of articulating the impact on and role of human bodies in relation to the environment. Grounded in a critical framework of feminist theory, Lawrence's practice posits the embodied experience of nature as an essential aspect of people's understanding of the interconnectedness that underpins all of Earth's ecologies. Highly concerned by the capitalist, anthropocentric motivations that have resulted in our current predicament, Lawrence sees feminist ideology as a strategy that can positively contribute to a vast array of healing processes.



Varicose (2011)

The works that comprise her *Material Matters* exhibition were created throughout the course of her doctorate studies, which were in turn driven by a series of residencies — in Beijing, China (2010); Peel Island, Australia (2010); Philadelphia, USA (2012); Aimoto, Japan (2012); and finally Kunming, China (2013). These residencies allowed Lawrence to experience a variety of landscapes and audiences, and witness first-hand the variance in approaches to the (mis)management of ecological issues by local governments, industry, and residential populations. This resulted in Lawrence developing a well-rounded, transnational perspective on environmental ethics — her works respond to no one specific site, but rather speak generally to the fundamental issue of human supremacy over nature, an idea whose prevalence unfortunately transcends cultural barriers.

Lawrence sees feminism as a leading light, an ethos that can and should inform the fundamental realignment of dominant ideologies that needs to occur in order for people and the environment to re-harmonise and begin healing together. Humanity's steady economic and technological progress has, in addition to normalising the subjugation of nature, resulted in a vain detachment from the environment with little-considered spiritual and psychological ramifications for individuals and communities alike. Embracing the ideas of feminist theorists like Lucy Lippard and Mary Kelly, and engaging with the tenets of eco-feminism as delineated by Val Plumwood and Greta Gaard, Lawrence's practice deftly navigates these issues through her use of textile and digital processes and anthropomorphic imagery.

Tree as person, or person as tree, is Lawrence's most persistent motif. Employing anthropomorphism is Lawrence's tactic to work within and against people's inherent anthropocentric bias, and encourage them to see the linkages that abound between nature and humans. Her multi-disciplinary practice encompasses sculpture, video, photography and drawing, but always returns to a hybridised imagery that locates figuration in nature, and finds natural forms in the body. Works like *Lionel* (2011) and *Pandanus Princess* (2011), and the triptych of works *Hold me close*, *Hold me closer*, and *Hold me again* (2011), all engage directly with this anthropomorphic strategy.



Lionel (detail) (2011)

Lawrence's practice is at its most poetic and conceptually rigorous when her processes and medium choices work in tandem with her subjects, as in *Liminal Being* (2014) and *(Wo)mangrove* (2014). In each of these works Lawrence uses textile techniques, specifically crochet and knitting, in combination with the form of a tree (constructed from furniture parts in the former, and a piece of found driftwood in the latter) as a means to imbue the natural with qualities associated with fibre — pliability, softness, containment and comfort. Lawrence's conscious use of medium is strategic on her part, cleverly placing her conceptual concerns in dialogue with art historical and cultural references.



Liminal Being
(detail) (2014)

Within Western art history, textile processes have traditionally been understood as craft as opposed to fine art practices, inferior to painting and sculpting mediums; within a history of labour, they have typically been deemed part of the domestic sphere, designated as 'women's work'. Lawrence, like many feminist artists before her, reclaims textile practice as a critical form of contemporary art, a loaded medium that carries with it centuries of gender disparity. In addition to knitting and crochet, Lawrence has also found embroidery to be an important medium, as well as employing cloth as a ground upon which to work. This aspect of her practice is evident in works like *Re/cology#1* (2012), a sparse work that teeters towards abstraction, and *Engagement with...#2* (2011-14), a monumental piece dripping with loose threads and portraying a figure sprouting branches and roots.

Where Lawrence works with digital processes, primarily video and photography, this again is a calculated choice of medium made for its conceptual value. In smart phones, Lawrence finds a particularly interesting tool of artistic production and display. Emblematic of people's detachment from the natural world, smart phones present us with a different sort of interconnection, one that is information based rather than ecologically based. Smart phones are directly related to the issues that concern Lawrence, a product of intense ecological destruction (specifically rare-earth mineral mining) and capitalist-driven consumerism (with companies relying on built-in obsolescence to remain in business). Her selection of video works continue her enquiry into the relationship between people and the environment, using her own body as a proxy to explore landscapes or phenomena metonymic to her overarching concerns.

Material Matters brings together a diverse selection of Lawrence's works over several years, which together encourage viewers to see the vastness of interconnectivity that exists between all life forms. Her practice prompts a serious consideration of contemporary environmental issues, the factors that have driven ecologically irresponsible decision-making, and our own individual relationships with the landscape, both in a day-to-day sense and at large. By inspiring greater appreciation for these issues amongst viewers, *Material Matters* makes a concerted effort to contribute positively to the debate that rages around environmental ethics and ecological responsibility.



Engagement with...#2
(2011-14)



Engagement with...#2 (detail) (2011-14)

Design by Designfront

Photo Acknowledgements

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Joachim Froese | Front Cover <i>Liminal Being</i> 2014 |
| | 04 <i>(Wo)mangrove</i> 2014 |
| | 06,07 Installation view QCA Galleries 2014 |
| | 10 <i>Liminal Being</i> (detail) 2014 |
| | 11 <i>Engagement with...#2</i> 2011-2014 |
| | 12 <i>Engagement with...#2</i> (detail) 2011-2014 |
| Kay S Lawrence | Inside Cover <i>Tree Line</i> 2012 |
| | 01 <i>Separation Anxiety</i> 2014 |
| | 02 <i>Hold me close</i> 2011 |
| | 03 <i>Hold me closer</i> 2011 |
| | 05 <i>Rural Days</i> (video still) 2014 |
| | 08 <i>Bound</i> 2012 |
| | 09 <i>Varicose</i> 2011 |
| | 10 <i>Lionel</i> (detail) 2011 |
| Carl Warner | 03 <i>Hold me again</i> 2011 |

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