The Botanical within the Built: Visual Art and Urban Botany

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Abstract

This research project considers the urban environment as a valuable site to examine humanity's relationship to nature, specifically botany, through a visual arts practice. Botany as it is used here is defined as all plant life. The project investigates a fascination with the evidence of humans' endeavours to contain, control, and manipulate the flora in their urban habitats. The creative works and exegesis speculatively explore the potential of everyday urban encounters with botany to perceive nature as something intrinsic to both the city and ourselves, by considering flora as a tactile, vital cohabitant.

Using botany as a metonym for the wider natural world, the creative works are informed by specific contemporary environmental issues, including habitat damage and encroachment, and the effects of waste associated with consumer culture. Urban botanical sites and domesticated plants have informed the drawings, sculpture, and installations that form the studio outcomes. In addition to living plants, two significant groups of materials were used in the creation of the sculptural works. The first are products associated with construction and landscaping, which signify the human intention to alter natural environments. The second are forms of consumer packaging commonly linked to environmental degradation. The creative and theoretical research asserts the vitality of these materials, revealing their potential liveliness in an ecosystem. By highlighting the entanglement of living and non-living entities that make up our urban habitats, the creative works challenge the concept of the 'natural' environment as being distant, wild and pure, and unsullied by the presence of humans.

This research contributes to the complex discussions surrounding environmental care, and the significance of personal practices in the construction of environmental ethics and aesthetics. It considers how an individual art practice can focus on personal interactions with the botanical world to demonstrate new ways of seeing this symbiotic relationship.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Julie-Anne Milinski

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The usual answer that environment is our natural surroundings obviously will not do, for this overlooks the fact that most people's lives are far removed from any kind of nature setting. Indeed, such a setting is even difficult to identify, since nature, in the sense of a landscape unaffected by human agency, has long since disappeared in nearly every region of the world.

—Arnold Berleant[1]

[1] Arnold Berleant, ed., "Introduction: Art, Environment and the Shaping of Experience," in *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), 6.

Introduction: Dismantling Binaries

With more than half of the world's population residing in cities, the majority of humanity's contact with other species, both plant and animal, is experienced within the built environment.[2] My PhD research project, "The Botanical within the Built: Visual Art and Urban Botany", has focussed on the commonplace botanical settings that city residents would typically encounter within the context of densely populated, built places. I question how urban encounters with botany, specifically "the plant life of a particular region, habitat, or geological period", offer the potential to perceive nature as something intrinsic to both the city and ourselves.[3] At the core of my speculative studio research is a lifelong fascination with plants and gardens, and the evidence of human endeavours to contain, control, and manipulate the flora within our habitats. While I appreciate the significance of ecosystems where human presence is less intrusive, and acknowledge the importance of preserving habitats to maintain biodiversity, this is not the focus of my enquiry.

The consideration of flora as a lively, tactile cohabitant is key to the research. By collapsing the distance between our immediate habitat and an out-dated notion of some exterior wilderness as being 'true nature', I have investigated current concerns of both domesticated and urban-situated botany in our immediate vicinity, and how these relate to our attitudes and actions towards the greater environment. I argue that this approach denaturalises a nature–culture division by looking at alternative ways of seeing our entanglement to both the living and non-living entities that make up our personal environment.

Geographer Sarah Whatmore has examined the continuous daily interactions between society and nature that destabilise the notion of these concepts as two distinct geographical sites. She notes that contemporary places and creatures deemed to be

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[2] United Nations, "World's Population Increasingly Urban with More Than Half Living in Urban Areas," *United Nations: Department of Economics and Social Affairs*, last modified 10 July 2014, accessed 20 July 2015, http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/world-urbanization-prospects-2014.html.

[3] Angus Stevenson, ed., "Botany," in *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed 10 January 2016. Oxford Reference.

wild are considered to reside "outside the compass of human society".[4] She cites Tim Ingold's observation that "something . . . must be wrong somewhere, if the only way to understand our own creative involvement in the world is by first taking ourselves out of it".[5] Whatmore argues that the parameters of contemporary environmental politics have been set by this concept of the wild as "pristine exterior, the touchstone of an original nature".[6]

Biologist Tim Low concurs that we have been "sold" a concept of nature that is detached from humanity—living "in wild places"—but he argues that wilderness is all around us in the populated areas in which we reside.[7] Low argues vehemently that when making environmental decisions, humans, as "ecosystem engineers",[8] need to consider the wild plants and animals thriving in human environments that have adapted to rely on our infrastructure and activity for survival.[9]

Thus, both Whatmore and Low interrogate urban environments for inclusive understandings of human relationships to nature. Similarly, my research has examined the built environment and the specific botany I encounter and experience in the course of everyday life. I argue that this approach to the mundane has revealed nature as intrinsic to both the city and humans. As Pauline von Bonsdorff, Professor of Art and Education at University of Jyväskylä, notes,

> Although we humans have a tendency to conceive of ourselves as different from the rest of nature, it is worth remembering that our relation to other species includes cohabitation in cities as well, and while we may not like some of our co-inhabitants, they all add up to the diversity and richness of a city.[10]

By observing the urban environment as a habitat to living, non-human entities, and focusing on the relevance of the plants growing in humanised landscapes as a

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[4] Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Nature, Culture, Spaces* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2002), 9.
[5] Tim Ingold, cited in ibid., 2.
[6] Ibid., 9.
[7] Tim Low, *The New Nature: Winners and Losers in Wild Australia* (Camberwell, Vic: Penguin, 2002), 3.
[8] Ibid., 311–12.
[9] The draining of the Yandina Creek Wetlands in July 2015 destroyed the habitat of numerous species of wildlife but was not contested by the Australian Conservation Foundation because the area was "highly modified" by human intervention. See Greg Roberts, "Yandina Creek Wetlands Draining Leaves Wildlife High and Dry," *The Australian*, 25 July 2015, accessed 12 October 2015, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/yandina-creek-wetlands-draining-leaves-wildlife-high-and-dry/story-e6frg6z6-1227455989730.
[10] Pauline von Bonsdorff, "Urban Richness and the Art of Building," in *The Aesthetics of Human Environments,* ed. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Orchard Park: Broadview Press, 2007), 68–69.

metonym for the wider natural world, the research has enriched my view that botany plays an active role in cities. The metonym has equipped me to interrogate what the mundane might reveal about wider notions of the environment both visually and conceptually. The research has been contingent on the domestic entanglement of living and non-living things, focusing on the vitality of these in urban ecologies that can be visualised through a range of mechanisms and methodologies.

Key to the project has been establishing how my research considers the concept of nature, given my argument that the dualism of nature and culture denies the rich intermingling of the urban environment to the wider environment's detriment. The term 'nature' is the cause of much debate among writers focused on the topic, evidenced by the titles of some publications identified during the research, such as *Nature*, *The Death of Nature*, *Ecology without Nature*, *Radical Nature,* and *Second Nature.*[11] Nature is not a term I use lightly, or without attempting to articulate a clear definition. It is relatively easy to accept that a nature reserve or national park contains a certain amount of nature, but what about an urban botanical garden? While the natural elements in the gardens are planned, cultivated, controlled, and maintained by humans, the flora and fauna in the park also actively participate in this environment. For the purpose of my research, I have used Glenn Parsons's definition of nature to describe the aspects of human environments that are neither built nor synthetic constructions. Parsons's definition extends on that of nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill, posing nature as "what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency of man".[12] Parsons reasons that this more inclusive definition allows for nature to be all around and within civilisation; i.e., "not all of nature, in this sense, is remote from human beings".[13] He cites examples such as clouds, rain, insects, birds, and plants as being natural things that are present "even in the midst of civilization's greatest cities".[14] Therefore, I argue that while humans intentionally situate much of the botany that grows in cities, the plants

[11] Jeffrey Kastner, ed., *Nature: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper, 1980); Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2009); Francesco Manacorda and Ariella Yedgar, eds., *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009* (London: Koenig Books Ltd, 2009); Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Grove Press, 1991).
[12] Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2008), 2.
[13] Ibid., 3.
[14] Ibid.

themselves are natural and, once situated, demonstrate their independent agency.

This research contributes to the complex discussions surrounding environmental care, and the significance of personal practices in the construction of environmental ethics and aesthetics. It considers how an individual art practice can focus on personal, bodily interactions with the botanical world to demonstrate new ways of seeing this interdependent relationship. The exegesis component analyses and scrutinises the creative studio research conducted between 2012 and 2016.

My research and studio investigations have been motivated by the following key questions:

- **How can an art practice imagine new ways of visualising the reciprocal and interdependent relationship between humans and the urban botanical world?**

- **Using the botany encountered in contemporary urban society as a leitmotif, how can creative works explore issues of the wider natural environment?**

- **How can materials associated with consumer culture (and known to impact the environment) be used to reveal their ongoing vitality and presence in the wider environment?**

- **Can this exploration enrich notions of what constitutes a natural environment in contemporary urban society?**

This exegesis outlines the theoretical discourse relevant to my enquiry, an examination of specific artworks supporting the assertions of my project, the methodologies employed in the studio, and the outcomes of my creative research. It consists of four chapters and a conclusion, which will be summarised below.

Chapter 1 investigates and documents the theoretical context and issues that have framed my enquiry. Locating the fascination with my research topic through my personal history and Edward O. Wilson's Biophilia hypothesis, I argue that the conceptual separation of natural and built environments is not reflective of most

people's lived experience. Using Arnold Berleant's description of an "expanded sense of environment where person and environment are continuous"[15] to understand the 'natural environment' of contemporary urban life, the exegesis argues for an abandonment of wilderness as some sort of imaginary container of 'pure nature'. The ineffectiveness of a nature–culture division is explored through the writing of Sarah Whatmore, Donna Haraway, and Mathew Gandy. I argue the importance of developing an aesthetic appreciation for the hybrid city as a way of exploring the complexity of human–nature entanglements in our shared ecosystem. Identifying the agency of botany has been a crucial aspect of the studio research, as has the use of plants as a metonym for wider concepts of nature. Similarly, Jane Bennett's argument for the consideration of matter as vibrant is linked to the impact of contemporary consumer culture in this shared habitat.[16]

Chapter 1 also interrogates visual evidence of current environmental degradation as a by-product of consumerism and waste practices. The analysis of Professor Gay Hawkins's argument for examining "everyday actions of cultivating a self . . . crucial for understanding how new waste habits and sensibilities might emerge" has assisted in navigating through these ideas and issues.[17] In the spirit of what Hawkins describes as "active experimentation"[18] and Berleant's "environment . . . thought of in a new expanded sense",[19] the research examines nature typically encountered in urban environments of the Western world. The experience of these more personal habitats is scrutinised to reveal the interconnectedness of our daily practices and our surroundings, which is also key to the research findings.

In Chapter 2, I compare Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1978), a key environmental artwork located in Manhattan, with a contemporary public park in proximity, The Highline, to demonstrate the historical progression and complexity of issues surrounding such spaces. *Time Landscape* is used as a starting point to problematise the traditional division between art and environmental aesthetics. The chapter examines selected artworks by contemporary artists who explore aspects of human

[15] Berleant, "Introduction: Art, Environment and the Shaping of Experience," 7.
[16] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[17] Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2006), 7.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Berleant, "Introduction," 7.

interactions with the environment, among them, Judy Pfaff, Joanna Langford, Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, Patricia Piccinini, and Simon Starling. Utilising Emily Brady's approach of privileging imagination as one of the five essential aspects of aesthetic appreciation, I have focussed on artists who demonstrate highly imaginative approaches to consider current environmental topics.

Chapter 3 outlines the key themes of urban botany in relation to control and containment, environmental hazard, and the shifting of geographical territories. It describes how I have examined these ideas using the following methodologies: walking, collecting (photographs, plants, and consumer plastic packaging), crocheting, and botanical drawing. Further, I analyse how these key themes are materially linked to contemporary consumer society and waste through the studio research. As I detail in this chapter, my artworks were predominantly fabricated from consumer packaging and materials associated with construction, intervention, and the control of environments, such as builders line and flagging tape. A range of works utilised crochet to emphasise the human hand as a counter to the machine-made materials. Botanical drawing also formed part of the research as both an investigative tool in the studio and a historical reference pertinent to concepts of classification.

Chapter 4 analyses the series of artworks created through my studio research during the research project that were exhibited in Brisbane, Toowoomba, and Philadelphia between 2012 and 2016. *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents* was shown at Metro Arts in Brisbane (2012)*; A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* at the Webb Gallery, Queensland College of Arts (QCA), Brisbane (2012) and at the White Studio, QCA (2015); *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* at Bleeding Hearts Gallery, Brisbane (2012), Project Gallery, QCA (2013), and the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba (2013); *Geniculum* at The Hold Artspace, West End (2013); *Jardinière* at artisan, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane (2014); *NYC / Philadelphia perambulatory harness proposition (come together fall apart, come together again fall apart again)* at Crane Arts, Philadelphia (2014); and *PlastiCity* and *PlastiScenery* at the White Studio, QCA (2016).

Over the past four years of this project, the slowly increasing number of botanical counterparts in my working ecosystem, the studio, has expanded my awareness of the nuances of this environment. The research has cultivated a complex awareness of the sensation that the studio is a porous site with constant exchanges between, and links to, external natural environments. The botany and I share the space and, in return for minimal care on my part (watering, fertilising, leaf wiping), I receive a constantly growing source of visual stimulation and purer air. My research experiments and experience have focussed on this complex and intimate entanglement that has provided new discoveries of reciprocities and links of the living (plants) and the non-living things that share my and our space. Here I argue that through affording time and attention to the mundane actions and materials of everyday urban life, this research project reveals the interconnection between living and non-living cohabitants.

Chapter 1: Biosphere – The Environment of the City

> The spatialities in which the ontological separation of nature and society inheres are woven through all manner of scientific, policy, media and everyday practices that enact nature as 'a physical place to which you can go' (Haraway 1992, 66).
>
> —Sarah Whatmore[20]

Introduction

This chapter examines the theoretical framework of my research, focussing on Edward O. Wilson's Biophilia hypothesis and associated theories of habitat enculturation as a starting point and the relevance that I establish through my personal history. I discuss my observations of urban environmental issues relevant to my enquiry, such as the increase of urban building density, consumerism's effects on the environment and our relationship to waste. I also discuss the existence of botanical boundaries—both the invisible legislated boundaries of plants considered as weeds and the physical boundaries where the presence of botany can be felt through temperature difference. Through examining contemporary discourses surrounding climate change, the political ethics of litter and environment degradation, and environmental aesthetics in hybrid environments, the city is established as a logical site for investigating human–nature relationships. Significantly, the agency of things other than human, particularly botany, is discussed in relation to my studio research.

Personal Perceptions of Nature and Culture: From Town and Country to the City

I spent my childhood in a small country town, with my grandparents living nearby on a farm. This experience largely shaped dichotomous views of my environment: for me, the small town that I lived in represented culture (despite its lack of sophistication), while my grandparents' farm represented nature (despite its relentless cycles of planting and harvesting). Men farmed, women gardened. Agriculture was about

[20] Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*, 2.

necessity—income, labour, machinery, the land. Gardening was about leisure—nurturing, creativity, hand tools, soil.

However, my concept of what was 'natural' was permanently altered when I was twelve years old. Deemed to be fast approaching a height considered socially disadvantageous for a female (over 177 centimetres), I was prescribed a course of high-dose oestrogen for three years to arrest my growth.[21] An article in the *Archive of Diseases of Childhood* in 1975 encapsulates the prevailing attitude of the time in its title "What Can We Do about Tall Girls?"[22] As the daughter of tall parents (my father is 188 centimetres tall, my mother 177 centimetres), my height was not a pathological condition, simply genetics. This medical intervention to achieve an aesthetic, societal norm in what I had up until that time considered to be a natural process—growing—led me to consider an ongoing duality between my artificial height of 183 centimetres and my predicted natural height of 195 centimetres.

From the ages of twelve to fifteen, my body was routinely X-rayed and measured by an endocrinologist at a Brisbane hospital to monitor my growth. As my body was assessed as a series of disconnected parts—limbs, trunk, head, hands, feet—I wondered if there was the potential for some part of me to 'grow rogue'. I imagined my body becoming disproportionately structured or perhaps even that I would lose symmetry. I pondered scenarios where my bones, frustrated by this medical intervention, would be held back for only so long, then burst through my skin in an uncontrollable growth spurt, a rupture of interior and exterior boundaries. I came to view my skeleton as having its own vital force, distinctly separate from the rest of my body, and having the power to stretch my skin beyond its limits. When my bones were deemed fused, the treatment, the hospital visits, and the measuring stopped. This experience led to my fascination with distinctions between the authentic, organic natural and the synthetic natural, modified in some way by humanity.

For the past thirty years, I have lived in cities, predominantly Melbourne but also Sydney and Brisbane. The high-density dwellings provided a stark contrast to the vast

[21] W. A. Marshall, "What Can We Do about Tall Girls?" *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 50, no. 9 (1975): 671–73, doi: 10.1136/adc.50.9.671.
[22] Ibid.

open spaces of my rural upbringing where childhood play was not restricted by space. The wide expansiveness of the countryside encouraged exploration and instilled the feeling of freedom and adventure. The city, by comparison, initially seemed restrictive and confining. Urban life made me acutely aware of a loss of sanctuary that the rural landscape had provided. During this period of adjustment to the urban environment, I viewed visits to the country as an escape from the containment of the city and an opportunity to enjoy the natural landscapes of national parks and bushland settings. In time, I sought out this sanctuary in urban public parks and gardens and soon felt more comfortable in these ordered botanical environments. Thus, my personal history has had an enduring influence on my interest in urban botanical environments and has been the core focus of my art practice and research since 2005. Central to this is my interest in the growing body of global research drawing on Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis, investigating the benefits of humans' relationships with other living things beyond resource exploitation.

The Biophilia Hypothesis

Written in 1984, Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis claims that humans have an "innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes".[23] Wilson believes that developing this human tendency to be drawn to other living things and developing an understanding of other organisms can lead to us valuing them more.[24] Stephen R. Kellert elaborates on Wilson's hypothesis, claiming that our dependence on nature for personal fulfilment is not restricted to material utilisation, but extends to emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development.[25] Even in 1984, this was not a new concept. As Robert Ulrich writes,

> The belief that contact with nature is somehow good or beneficial for people is an old and widespread notion. The gardens of the Ancient Egyptian nobility, the walled gardens of Persian settlements in Mesopotamia, and the gardens of merchants in medieval Chinese cities indicate that early urban peoples went to considerable lengths to maintain contact with nature.[26]

[23] Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.
[24] Ibid., 2.
[25] Stephen R. Kellert, "The Biological Basis for Human Values of Nature," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993), 42.
[26] Robert S. Ulrich, "Biophilia, Biophobia and Natural Landscapes," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, 73.

Historically, the garden has functioned variously as a site of agriculture, retreat, spirituality, scientific discovery, lavish ornamentation, status, and recreation. Whatever the purpose, gardens share a supposition of an intensified encounter with nature. The need for green spaces in cities for reasons other than leisure was identified during the Industrial Revolution when a major societal shift away from an agricultural existence caused large-scale migration to cities in Europe and North America. Farming practices become mechanised, requiring less human labour, while in urban regions, factories flourished. As overcrowding and pollution plagued industrial cities, the importance of public parks and gardens for the working classes for reasons of health and recreation was identified. In England, Sir Ebenezer Howard, founder of the Garden City Association, proposed an urban planning model of garden cities surrounded by agricultural land. Published as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* in 1902, Howard's proposal sought to reverse the trend of overpopulated Victorian slums.[27] Today, as Western cities continue to become more densely populated, the need for garden spaces is recognised by urban planners, with Wilson's hypothesis gaining traction in urban architecture, where the term "biophilic design" is now commonplace.

John Falk and John Balling state that the innate human preferences for savanna-like settings (which once would have signalled a better chance of survival) are modified through personal experience and enculturation.[28] This concept is discussed in more depth in Chapter 2 in my examination of Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape*, as is the negative reaction from residents of Greenwich Village when this living artwork became overgrown. In the extreme, the antithesis of biophilia is biophobia, described by social ecologist Stephen R. Kellert as destructive tendencies and rejection towards, and the avoidance of, certain natural environments.[29] The reality is that while urban residents may feel at home in a park or community garden, they might be ill-equipped to survive in the wilderness, unless perhaps supported by a reality television crew—"Survivor" style. Fear of snakes and spiders and their habitats is a frequently cited biophobic tendency. David Byrne adopts the role of a biophobe (albeit facetiously) in a Talking Heads song, "Nothing but Flowers". Finding himself helpless in a city where the

[27] "Sir Ebenezer Howard: British Urban Planner," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, last modified 23 February 2012, accessed 3 June 2015, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/273428/Sir-Ebenezer-Howard.
[28] John Falk and John Balling, "Evolutionary Influence on Human Landscape Preference," *Environment and Behavior* 42, no. 4 (2010): 479–93, doi: 10.1177/0013916509341244.
[29] Kellert, "The Biological Basis for Human Values of Nature," 42.

conveniences of contemporary urban living have been reclaimed by nature, Byrne laments,

> There was a factory, now there are mountains and rivers . . .
> There was a shopping mall, now it's all covered with flowers . . .
> If this is paradise, I wish I had a lawnmower . . .
> I miss the Honky Tonks, Dairy Queens, and 7-Elevens . . .
> We used to microwave, now we just eat nuts and berries . . .
> Don't leave me stranded here, I can't get used to this lifestyle.[30]

While humorous, Byrne's biophobic irony contains a degree of truth. My personal experience concurs with Falk and Balling's argument of enculturation, where, after my relocation from a rural to an urban environment, I noted the gradual change in my preference towards more ordered natural environments. Each geographical shift brought about a preferential shift, and not only in my visual predilections. The longer I resided in cities, the more my feelings of mild discomfort in rugged bushland settings became evident. This change in preference now extends to the level of avoidance of dense bushland settings, even urban examples such as the Seven Hills Bushland Reserve, which is less than five minutes walk from my home. This is despite a childhood spent enjoying playtime on the riverbanks at my grandparents' farm, and regular family camping trips in unmediated natural environments devoid of basic amenities such as running water and toilets. Marente Bloemheuvel and Toos van Kooten, curators of the 2011 exhibition *Windflower: Perceptions of Nature*, articulate the concept of environmental enculturation in relationship to artists, noting,

> The different perceptions of nature arise from the interaction between the individual and his or her cultural background, between the artist and the society in which he or she lives and was raised. Views on the role and meaning of nature are different in every culture and the changing world, globalization and consumerism have had a big influence on people's relationship to nature.[31]

This statement is illustrated by the winning entry of the 2015 Wynn Prize, *Biophilia* (figure 1), by Natasha Bieniek. This prize is awarded by the Art Gallery of New South Wales for "the best landscape painting of Australian scenery in oils or watercolours or for the best example of figure sculpture by Australian artists".[32] Melbourne resident

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[30] Talking Heads, "Nothing but Flowers," *Naked* (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Records, 1988). CD.
[31] Marente Bloemheuvel and Toos van Kooten, eds., "Introduction," in *Windflower: Perceptions of Nature*, ex. cat. (Rotterdam, NAi Publishers, 2011), 11.
[32] "Wynne Prize," *Art Gallery of NSW* (website), accessed 2 October 2015, http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/wynne/.

Bieniek describes her prize-winning painting of a lone figure in an inner-city garden as depicting “a sense of tranquility that contrasts with its active surroundings”.[33] She hopes that by highlighting this type of natural environment, she can “present the idea that we, as humans, are not above nature but very much a part of it”.[34] For me, this painting validates the sanctuary that nature provides to urban residents, connecting them to natural environments, no matter how ordered, that relate to the wider natural world.

Figure 1 Natasha Bieniek *Biophilia* 2015

Bloemheuvel and van Kooten’s observation of the role that societal upbringing plays in an artist’s perception of nature is certainly true of my own experience. Key to the formation of my perceptions was my experience of medical science’s ability to alter a seemingly unstoppable course of nature by altering how tall I would grow. Further, my migration from country to city has been pivotal in shaping both my concepts of nature and my desire to seek a connection with nature in the urban environment.

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

The Hybrid City

> Cities are not distinct or separate from nature, or somehow unnatural (Harvey 1993; Heynan et al. 2006). They represent processes of human transformation of the material environment, in the same way that rural agriculture and other, what might be seen as more natural, environments are transformed by human activity, including the demands of cities and their emissions.
>
> —Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson[35]

The city is the site of my investigation and the place in which I most frequently experience nature. This encompasses my studio at QCA, which is surrounded by parklands on the banks of the Brisbane River; my home in suburban Camp Hill; and the passages, footpaths, and roads that I navigate as part of my daily life between these places. These are the urban locations of my human activity where I observe the liveliness of things *other than human*. During the course of my research, other cities have broadened these experiences, most notably London, Melbourne, New York, Paris, Philadelphia, Rome, Singapore, Sydney, and Venice, where I was able to compare the similarities and differences between these geographically, architecturally, and climatically varied metropolises, and return to my own habitat with a fresh perspective. These experiences are further discussed in Chapters 2–4 in relation to the work of my exemplar artists and my own studio work.

To research the city and to observe the space of my human activity, I established walking as an essential methodology. While traversing suburban and city streets on foot, I have considered the difference between the inner city and the Brisbane suburbs, where backyard gardens and large shady trees are still prevalent. When moving from the concrete-and-glass matrix of Brisbane's Central Business District (CBD) into the tropical, riverside botanical gardens, I have noticed the slightly cooler, moister air. The time and space that these urban walks have provided for observations and experiences were crucial to the research and the artworks, which have been created in ways that I never envisaged at the outset of this project. Minor observations of the interstices of the built and the botanical experienced at a walking pace, where sensory faculties are in full attention, go unnoticed when viewed from mechanical

[35] Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds., "Reflections on Materialities," in *Wiley Blackwell Companions to Geography: New Blackwell Companion to the City* (Somerset, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2011), 10.

modes of transport such as car or bus, and when feet do not connect with the ground that is being observed.

The city provides a multitude of instances where the natural and built environments overlap and intersect. My observations while walking in the CBD, where roads and footpaths cover every ground surface and towering vertical structures dominate the landscape, led me to ponder what lies beneath the bitumen and concrete that seals the city like a skin (figure 2). The evidence of city trees' dependency on soil is hidden, along with the myriad of underground cables and pipes that provide power, water, technology and waste removal, organic and synthetic life-sustaining systems intermingling.

Figure 2 Base of tree on Grey Street, Southbank, Brisbane 2013

Haraway identifies nature/culture as one of the traditional dualisms in Western society that aids in the domination of "all constituted as other", such as "women, nature and animals".[36] Technological and scientific practices that obliterate these distinctions

[36] Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 177.

enable the construction of her cyborg vision, an interconnection of the organic and synthetic, which she posits as a liberator from dualisms. She calls for the acknowledgment of science and technology's entanglement in social relationships and an "embracing" of "the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life".[37] Matthew Gandy expands on Haraway's concept of the cyborg to construct his concept of cyborg urbanisation, infinitely porous organic and synthetic networks, as a way of "rematerializing the city and establishing practical connections between the body, technology and space".[38] Gandy believes Haraway's cyborg manifesto "open[s] up new possibilities for the understanding of relations between nature and culture".[39] He argues that the cyborg is essentially a spatial metaphor, which he examines using the concept of the physical interface between the body and the city; that is, the material infrastructure that joins humans to technological networks. He states, "If we understand the cyborg to be . . . a hybrid of machine and organism, then urban infrastructures can be conceptualized as a series of interconnecting life-support systems."[40]

Gandy vividly describes the home as acting as the human body's exoskeleton by providing shelter and other life-supporting functions.[41] He describes the function of home as both "'prosthesis and prophylactic', in which modernist distinctions between nature and culture, and between the organic and the inorganic, become blurred (Vidler 1990, 37)".[42] He extends this metaphor beyond the home to the shared, interlinked services that modern cities require to operate, noting, "these interstitial spaces of connectivity within individual buildings extend through urban space to produce a multi-layered structure of extraordinary complexity and utility".[43] Gandy's description gives form to my urban perambulatory observations whereby my thoughts permeate the layers of the concrete structures of the built environment to imagine the synthetic and organic entanglements that exist in the urban environment with a blatant disregard for clear-cut delineations of nature and artifice.

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[37] Ibid., 181.
[38] Matthew Gandy, "Cyborg Urbanization: Complexity and Monstrosity in the Contemporary City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, no. 1 (2005): 28, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.2005.00568.x.
[39] Ibid., 27.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 28.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

The seeming impenetrability of the city has also been ruptured during walks through my neighbourhood in Camp Hill, one of the many suburbs in Brisbane that is undergoing extensive residential development. Here I have had the opportunity to observe buildings slowly rise from the ground, where their usually hidden infrastructure is temporarily exposed. In Camp Hill (and similar Brisbane suburbs within a ten-kilometre radius of the city), for each existing home demolished, two or more dwellings are constructed in its place. On many suburban blocks, houses are dismantled and disconnected from foundations, gardens uprooted, and earth levelled in preparation for a new structure to be erected. The evidence of underground pipes and cables, usually concealed, is revealed momentarily emerging from the ground. As soon as new buildings are erected, the ground is once again covered in concrete, and the networks of water, sewerage, power, and communication are re-established and hidden. These seemingly banal observations of suburban life have been important to my research for the very reason that they are commonplace, and involve thinking about how everyday human activity is made possible by the hidden infrastructure of the home environment. These concealed life support systems have expanded my thinking regarding the role of plants in urban environments, whose contribution to humans' well-being is also partly invisible (e.g., air purification and temperature control).

The move towards higher-density dwellings means that the surface area of the ground covered is substantially greater, which essentially results in less land for lawns and gardens. Tony Hall, Adjunct Professor, Urban Research Program at Griffith University, examines the impact of the loss of the garden space on the wider environment. In his detailed quantitative study of increasing housing density and the importance of backyards in a wider ecological function, Hall notes,

> The land around the houses has played an important ecological role sustaining biodiversity, absorbing storm water run-off and providing shade from the sun. Given the large land area taken up by suburbs, these effects have not been inconsequential. The presence of vegetation within the back garden, when taken in aggregate, has been important for the microclimate and biodiversity in a way that has benefited the community as a whole.[44]

[44] Tony Hall, *The Life and Death of The Australian Back Yard* (Collingwood, Vic: CSIRO Publishing, 2010), 147.

In the face of global warming, any change to temperatures caused by the loss of garden space may seem significant. In his 2014 lecture at the Danish Royal Academy, Bruno Latour described the world we inhabit as first nature, with capitalism being our second nature, lamenting that "second nature is more solid, less transitory, less perishable than the first . . . this world of beyond is not that of salvation and eternity, but that of economic matters".[45] As Latour suggests, despite the overwhelming scientific evidence of global warming, and that this is "very likely due to human activities",[46] there has been a global political reluctance to make the changes required to reduce atmospheric CO_2 due to the potential effect on world economies. However, the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris in December 2015 has resulted in the negotiation of the "Paris Agreement", with 195 countries adopting a legally binding global climate deal aimed at limiting global warming to less than 2°C.[47] While the "Paris Agreement" is promising, plans for countries to convert to clean energy is of major concern to the Australian government given the economic reliance on coal. When interviewed at the conference, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop stated that "of course if we're being ambitious over time we will need to work even harder. But we don't want to damage our economy without having an environmental impact."[48] As one of the world's highest per capita emitters, Australia's response to the "Paris Agreement" will no doubt be closely scrutinised by the rest of the world.

While some of the visible indications of global warming such as glacial retreat, declining Arctic Sea ice, and deforestation are geographically distant, the existence of "urban heat islands"[49] may be more immediately apparent to the 66 percent of

[45] Bruno Latour, "On Some of the Affects of Capitalism" (Lecture presented at the Danish Royal Academy of Science, 26 February 2014), http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/136-AFFECTS-OF-K-COPENHAGUE.pdf.
[46] NASA, "Climate Change: How Do We Know?" *NASA Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet*, last modified 26 January 2016, accessed 4 February 2016, http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/.
[47] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "Adoption of the Paris Agreement," 12 December 2015, accessed 31 December 2015, https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf.
[48] Francis Keany, "Paris Climate Deal: What Will the Historic Agreement Mean for Australia?" *ABC News,* 14 December 2015, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-13/what-will-the-paris-climate-deal-mean-for-australia/7024476.
[49] This term is used to describe the phenomenon of urban regions being warmer than surrounding rural areas; see Environmental Protection Authority, "Heat Island Effect," last modified 4 December 2015, accessed 13 December 2015, http://www.epa.gov/heatisland/.

Australians living in a capital city.[50] As previously stated, I have experienced this phenomenon when walking from densely built areas of the city into parklands, noticing the slight cooling of the air. Notably, when travelling on other modes of transport, such as car or bus, this change is not perceivable.

Figure 3 Queensland College of Arts Graduation Exhibition's opening night, 27 November 2014, view from the Griffith University Art Gallery, marquee collapsing under the weight of golf-ball size hailstones

I am one of the 62 percent of Australians who believe that "climate change is already impacting our nation's environment by causing more extreme drought events".[51] Memorable weather events personally experienced in last decade have ranged from one extreme to the other. I lived in Melbourne at the time of the 'Millennium Drought' (2002–7) where the dramatic impact of water restrictions dramatically changed routines of daily life. (I elaborate on this in relation to Gerda Steiner and Jörg

[50] Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Capital Cities: Past, Present and Future," last modified 2 April 2014, accessed 7 February 2014, http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/products/AC53A071B4B231A6CA257CAE000ECCE5?OpenDocument.

[51] IPSOS, "Climate Change: Australians Believe Extreme Weather Events Are Already More Frequent," *IPSOS Climate Change Report April 2015*, accessed 26 August, 2015, http://ipsos.com.au/australians-believe-extreme-weather-events-and-climate-change-is-more-frequent/.

Lenzlinger's installation *The Water Hole* in Chapter 2.[52]) The Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria resulted in the deaths of 173 people, with 414 injured, when an intense heat wave combined with high winds.[53] During this time, the skies of Melbourne were ominous with the glow of fire and smell of smoke as the fires caused widespread damage to townships not far from the city. In late November 2010, I moved to Brisbane, just weeks prior to the 2010/11 floods, where the Brisbane River rose up and into the CBD and suburbs. Then, on 27 November 2014, a super cell storm in Brisbane lasted less than an hour, causing more than $1.1 billion damage (figure 3). John Allen, Postdoctoral Research Scientist at Columbia University, believes that there is "an increasing likelihood that we will see severe thunderstorms more often" due to climate change.[54]

As governments look to the most efficient ways to house growing populations, higher density cities have both financial and environmental advantages, as Bridge and Watson assert that,

> as an alternative to . . . urban sprawl, higher density cities are increasingly being seen as the solution, rather than the main cause, of global warming. High-density, more compact settlements are seen as more energy efficient than the car-based, low-density, energy-sapping suburbs.[55]

New architecture in cities manifests both the need for gardens and the need for energy efficiency; consequently, there is a growing prevalence of gardens utilising previously non-traditional sites, such as rooftops, indoor spaces, and exterior vertical walls. These contemporary gardens demonstrate both the human desire for frequent contact with nature and the environmental benefits that the presence of botany can provide. Examples of these types of gardens can be seen in newly constructed apartment blocks, hotels, and corporate office blocks, as well as retrofitted to existing buildings. As high-rise residential apartments see backyards replaced with balconies as a site for gardening, city dwellers embrace small-scale botanical projects from terrariums to balcony vegetable gardens and shared community plots to naturalise

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[52] Australia Government, "Natural Disasters in Australia," last modified 18 December 2015, accessed 26 January 2016, http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/natural-disasters.
[53] Ibid.
[54] John Allen, "Australia Faces a Stormier Future Thanks to Climate Change", Environment & Energy, *The Conversation*, last modified 19 December, 2014, accessed 16 August 2015, http://theconversation.com /australia-faces-a-stormier-future-thanks-to-climate-change-35327.
[55] Bridge and Watson, *New Blackwell Companion to the City,* 10.

their habitats. Rather than focus on escaping the city to spend time in nature, biophilic urban architecture is weaving botany into the fabric of the built environment. Like traditional gardens, these green environments are ordered, contained, and maintained, incorporating botany into the cityscape. In the twenty-first century, these are the natural environments of the everyday urban resident, satisfying our biophilic desires.

Figure 4 Vertical and Balcony Gardens, One Central Park, Sydney 2015

In this contemporary architecture, dichotomies of nature and culture are destabilised, since botany is not an afterthought but an integral element in the environment (figure 4). The appearance of plants growing on the external surfaces of buildings embraces an aesthetic of nature reclamation (figure 5), commonly associated with abandoned human habitats. However, in developments such as One Central Park in Sydney, the reclamation is engineered and designed to attract human-habitation.

Figure 5 Abandoned Fishing Village of Houtouwan, China, 2015

Like Haraway and Gandy, Whatmore also engages with the spatialities and knowledge practices of everyday life to critically examine the hybridity between natures, cultures, and spaces, suggesting,

> Here the notion of thinking through the body is invested in a particular direction, admitting the know-hows, tacit skills and bodily apprehensions through which everyday life goes on into the repertoire of knowledge that social/scientists need to take seriously (see de Certeau et al. 1998; Schatzki et al. 2000). These everyday knowledge practices have been argued to be performative rather than cognitive, such that 'talk' itself is better understood as action rather than as communication (see Shusterman 2000; Thrift 2000a).[56]

By being cognisant of the boundaries of daily life, and questioning these borders through observations within my urban habitat, I have witnessed the rich commingling that occurs between humans and nature, and the extent of the hybridity of the urban environment. Our everyday, mundane, domestic contact with botany has proven to be a source of inspiration and illumination to enrich notions of the natural environment as being right here, located in and integrated with the city. These revelations relied on my ability to cultivate an aesthetic appreciation of the botanical presence within cities, framed by and integrated with the built environment.

[56] Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*, 6.

Aesthetic Appreciation of the Hybrid City

Environmental aestheticians seek to find an appropriate way to appreciate both natural and human environments, with some theorists believing that this will directly benefit the environment.[57] Contemporary debate within this field has emerged from a growing awareness of environmental issues that began in the 1960s, with philosopher Ronald Hepburn's pivotal 1966 article "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty"[58] described as "almost single-handedly initiating the renewal" of environmental aesthetics.[59] Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant write "environmental aesthetics considers philosophical issues concerning the aesthetic appreciation of the world at large and, moreover, the world as constituted not simply by particular objects but also by larger units, such as landscapes, environments, and ecosystems."[60]

In the field of environmental aesthetics, there is a distinct separation of human and natural environments. In the concepts of nature most commonly adopted in natural environmental aesthetics, the evidence of humanity's existence compromises the authenticity of a natural environment. Considering that 54 percent of the world's population resides in cities, where the entanglement of natural and constructed environments is most evident, it seems idealistic to overlook the abundance of natural elements in the complex urban ecosystems in which we reside. While the rich conglomeration of buildings, beings, infrastructure, and organic and synthetic networks is not necessarily the site that comes to mind when contemplating 'the (definitive) environment', it is in fact the natural habitat of many living entities. The term 'environment' has become increasingly politicised and multifaceted, requiring a location with rigid geographical parameters to define it, no matter how arbitrary these parameters may be. In questioning what the environment is, Timothy Morton asks,

> Is there such a thing as *the environment*? Is it everything 'around' us? At what point do we stop, if at all, drawing the line between *environment and non*

[57] See Arnold Berleant, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004), 86, and Yuriko Saito, "The Role of Aesthetics in Civic Environmentalism," in *The Aesthetics of Human Environments,* ed. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2007), 203.
[58] Ronald Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, 43.
[59] Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., "Introduction: The Aesthetics of Nature," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, 14.
[60] Ibid., 11.

> *environment*? The atmosphere? Earth's gravitational field? Earth's magnetic field, without which everything would be scorched by solar winds? The sun, without which we wouldn't be alive at all? The Galaxy? Does the environment include or exclude us? Is it natural or artificial, or both? Can we put it in a conceptual box? Might the word *environment* be the wrong word?[61]

Berleant attempts to define the term, rejecting a simple expansion of the environment to encompass built/altered landscapes as well as the idea of the environment as surroundings that lie "outside a person . . . a container within which people pursue their private purposes".[62] He describes 'environment' as "one of the last survivors of a mind–body dualism, a place beyond" that requires distance for contemplation.[63] He questions,

> for where can we locate 'the' environment? Where is 'outside' in this case? . . . Such a purportedly outside environment dissolves into a complex network of relationships, connections and continuities of those physical, social, and cultural conditions that circumscribe my actions, my responses, my awareness, and that give shape and content to the very life that is mine. For there is no outside world . . . there is no inner sanctum in which I can take refuge from inimical external forces. The perceiver (mind) is an aspect of the perceived (body) . . . person and environment are continuous. Thus both aesthetics and environment must be thought of in a new expanded sense. In both art and environment, we can no longer stand apart but join in as active participants.[64]

In terms of humanity's ability to impact on the environment, Parsons concurs with Berleant's observation of the omnipresence of human agency. He notes that even in the most remote areas of wilderness, the presence of air-borne pollutants may be detected, and aircrafts and satellites may pass through the sky.[65] In February 2015, I had a profound experience of the extent of humanity's reach and impact on the environment when I observed the night sky from 10,700 feet above sea level on the road to Mauna Kea, a dormant volcano on the island of Hawaii. The world's largest astronomical observatory (figure 6) is located on the summit of Mauna Kea, a unique site ideally suited as stated by the Institute of Astronomy at the University of Hawaii,

> The exceptional stability of the atmosphere above Mauna Kea permits more detailed studies than are possible elsewhere, while its distance from city lights and a strong island-wide lighting ordinance ensure an extremely dark sky, allowing observation of the faintest galaxies that lie at the very edge of the

[61] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.
[62] Berleant, "Introduction: Art, Environment and the Shaping of Experience," 6.
[63] Ibid., 7.
[64] Ibid., 6–7.
[65] Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature*, 2.

> observable Universe. A tropical inversion cloud layer about 600 meters (2,000 ft.) thick, well below the summit, isolates the upper atmosphere from the lower moist maritime air and ensures that the summit skies are pure, dry, and free from atmospheric pollutants.[66]

The remoteness of the observatory's location to avoid atmospheric pollutants was evident as we made our way by bus through dimly lit towns up the steep roads. Standing on the side of the dormant volcano, a group of us took turns to peer into a telescope to view planets in our solar system, with the moons of Jupiter clearly visible. The feeling of awe and vastness was momentarily disrupted as we observed the International Space Station passing through the sky. Humans' presence in space seemed to make the other planets seem closer, reachable, another territory in our environment. Just as nature may once have been considered as a location somewhere 'out there', a distant place, the idea of 'outer-space' seemed less remote.

Figure 6 CFHT (Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope) and Gemini Observatory, Mauna Kea, Hawaii 2015

Moreover what do the residents of the International Space Station consider 'the environment'? A 1989 report commissioned by NASA titled "Interior Landscape Plants for Indoor Air Pollution Abatement", which is discussed in detail in Chapter 4 was commissioned to investigate the feasibility of using indoor plants to purify the air of harmful organic compounds emitted from building materials in sealed environments

[66] University of Hawaii, "About Mauna Kea Observatories", *Institute for Astronomy*, accessed 7 March 2015, https://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/mko/about_maunakea.shtml.

such as space stations.[67] This report has been pivotal to my appreciation of the agency of plants and the reciprocity of our relationship to botany, including indoor plants. Research continues on the International Space Station as to the benefits of the astronauts growing plants, including the non-nutritional value of providing comfort and relaxation to the crew.[68] The 'space garden' is a living link to the blue planet they gaze upon from 200 miles away. These plants connect to the wider natural environment back on earth as the data from their experiments "will help advance Earth-based greenhouses and controlled-environment agricultural systems and help farmers produce better, healthier crops in small spaces".[69]

Michel Foucault describes the garden as being an example of a heterotopia—a single, physical space in which multiple spaces are juxtaposed. He states that the garden is simultaneously "the smallest parcel of the world" and "the totality of the world".[70] From their unique vantage point, the astronauts on the Space Station can see both their small parcel of once-terrestrial botany and the totality of the blue planet it came from. Similarly, the urban gardener tending to their balcony pot plants is mindful of weather, water, and soil nutrients, giving them an appreciation for factors affecting the wider natural environment.

With no place on earth left unaffected to some degree by humanity (regardless of the visibility of the effect), the interconnectedness of the world's environments is indisputable. Some of the detrimental environmental effects of damaging practices are felt in locations geographically distant from where the activity is being conducted. Rather than focusing on large-scale abstract concepts, I have directed my project to urban botany as a metonym for nature. Through cultivating an aesthetic appreciation of natural aspects of the urban habitat—the location of our everyday activities and practices—the interconnectedness of our actions and the environment may have more resonance. It may be in part that my experience of my natural height being altered has

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[67] B. C. Wolverton, Anne Johnson, and Keith Bounds, "Interior Landscape Plants for Indoor Air Pollution Abatement," *Final Report*, 15 September 1989, NASA Office of Commercial Programs-Technology Utilization Division and the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, 2, http://ntrs.nasa.gov/archive/nasa/casi.ntrs.nasa.gov/19930073077.pdf.

[68] Lori Meggs, "Growing Plants and Vegetables in a Space Garden," *NASA: International Space Station*, last modified 15 June 2010, accessed 2 April 2015, http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/research/10-074.html.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 26.

instilled in me an appreciation of nature that is cultivated, hybridised, and manipulated. However, my appreciation for hybridised natural environments is not popular in the field of environmental aesthetics, the practitioners/theoreticians of which prefer to keep their environments delineated. Emily Brady, Reader in Aesthetics at the University of Edinburgh, School of Geosciences, notes the tension in the aesthetic appreciation of objects with "mixed origins"—those "things that have both natural and human causes", such as gardens, topiary, and some environmental art, which she sees as examples of these problematic hybrids.[71] Brady believes this tension in aesthetic appreciation to be unresolvable but also "what makes this appreciation so interesting and complex".[72] However, she does attempt to find ways to appreciate topiary in a paper co-authored by Isis Brook. Introducing the ethics of the aesthetics of topiary, the writers question whether thwarting a tree's growth is ethical.[73] The writers go on to establish that a tree's goal is to "thrive", which is also the goal of the topiarist, arriving at the conclusion that topiary can be a creative relationship between culture and nature.[74]

The tensions in natural environmental aesthetic theory are largely in part due to a reluctance to relinquish nature–culture distinctions. Parsons introduces his argument for the unnaturalness of gardens in an explanation of how it is only in contrast to the built environment that the garden may seem natural, saying,

> The intuitive idea that gardens are natural is supported by the fact that gardens contrast sharply and vividly with the most visually prominent aspect of the human world: architecture. Unlike buildings, bridges and other architectural structures, gardens tend to be green, lacking in planar surfaces and sharp angles, and largely alive. This dramatic contrast can make it easy to assume that gardens and their contents belong to the category other than architecture: that they must be natural entities, rather than artificial ones.[75]

As contemporary gardens insinuate themselves into the category of architecture as vertical walls and rooftops, Parsons's observation of "dramatic contrast" diminishes.

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[71] Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 62.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Emily Brady and Isis Brook, "Topiary: Ethics and Aesthetics," *Ethics and The Environment* 8, no. 1 (2003): 129.
[74] Ibid., 129–30.
[75] Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature,* 115.

However, he attempts to further his claim of unnatural plants by denying the inherent agency of botany, bestowing humans with credit for their vitality, stating,

> The size of particular plants in the garden, at any given time, is also often unnatural: by a judicious combination of pruning and fertilizing the gardener sculpts plants and hedges into desired forms. Indeed, even the mere growth of the plants can be somewhat unnatural, being brought about by the gardener's deliberate irrigation of an arid plot.[76]

This anthropocentric viewpoint diminishes the nature in cities to commodity and ornament and artificially isolates urban flora as distinctly excluded from the category of natural entities. The antithesis to my argument, Parsons's decrying of all human presence and action as despoiling natural settings and compromising its natural aesthetic does not champion nature in cities. Rather than award degrees of naturalness to plants and botanical urban settings, my project uses botany as a metonym for a wider natural environment, something Low argues when he states that ancient trees cities offer a continuity with the past, "serving as windows onto landscapes we will never see".[77] I argue that by seeing the relationship we have to nature in the mundane, 'up close and personal' encounters with botany, we may more readily understand our interconnectedness and the consequences of our daily activities and actions on a larger scale. By developing an aesthetic appreciation for hybrid environments and the plants that we cohabit with, observing the small and often unremarkable ways in which they grow, multiply, flourish, or die, we may recognise the goal we share with botany: to thrive. In my studio, these observations have been noted and creatively explored through artworks that use botany. Brady notes the possibility "of the role that art may play in creatively articulating relations between humans and the natural environment" and that whether these relationships are harmonious or conflicting, they "draw attention to human impact on nature and highlight through artistic means the complexity of human-nature-entanglements".[78]

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Low, *The New Nature,* 307.

[78] Emily Brady, "The Human-Nature Relationship in Environmental and Land Art," in *Art, Ethics, and Environment: A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature,* ed. Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir and Ólafur Páll Jónsson (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing and GSE Research, 2006), 109.

The Vitality of Plants

My research on botany uses plants as a metonym for, and connection to, the wider concept of nature. Specifically, my project has embraced the botanical activity in the built environment that speaks of a connection with humans as cohabitants of the city, with each benefiting from the others' presence. To assert the reciprocity of this relationship, it is imperative that the agency of botany is established. This agency of plants in the urban environment is clearly visible as they wind their way over, under, through, and around built obstacles. Roots split through concrete and bitumen, vines creep through cracks. Less visible effects but still evidence of their vitality, plants are introduced as a visual and olfactory enhancement to domestic and commercial environments. Botany's visual presence alone has been found to have beneficial effects on human well-being that range from improved cognitive function and stress relief to pain reduction and enhanced recovery by patients suffering from clinically diagnosed disorders.[79] Additionally, plants' life processes have been proven effective in the abatement of indoor air pollution, which confirms their role as active participants rather than passive objects in shared environments.[80]

Geographer Renate Sander-Regier notes that some geographers looking for alternatives to an anthropocentric domination of agency are "registering the 'creative presence' of non-human entities among us", with a view to bringing faculties of empathy and imagination as counters to traditional observational research methodologies.[81] He determines the hybrid space of the personal garden as ideal to explore "botanical agency of presence, action, intent, association and capacity".[82] The active participation of personal gardeners, well documented in contemporary personal gardening literature, reveals insights into human–plant relationships not necessarily experienced by the observer passing through a site, whether it be a garden, park or other natural environment. The gardener's calendar of seasonal activities involves both creative and routine tasks that all involve hands-on engagement with plants and soil; for example, planting, watering, fertilising, pruning, and striking cuttings. Through

[79] Stephen R. Kellert, "Biophilia," in *Encyclopedia of Ecology*, ed. Sven Erik Jørgensen and Brian D. Fath (Oxford: Academic Press, 2008), 463–4, doi:10.1016/B978-008045405-4.00636-4.
[80] Wolverton, Johnson, and Bounds, "Interior Landscape Plants for Indoor Air Pollution Abatement."
[81] Renate Sander-Regier, "Bare Roots: Exploring Botanical Agency in the Personal Garden," *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 21 (2009): 64.
[82] Ibid., 63.

the creative research, I have experienced this engagement and used botany as a leitmotif to explore issues of the wider natural environment.

It should be noted that while Sander-Regier's observations resonate with my studio experience, prior to my PhD candidature, my interest in personal gardening was limited to general maintenance and very occasional seasonal enthusiasm for planting seedlings in spring. I saw the relationship between my garden and me as one-sided, where I worked to maintain an environment, failing to acknowledge the reciprocity of the arrangement. This research has made me more attentive to what I reap from my efforts as the plants respond (or not) to care. The more success I witness with a particular specimen, the more I persevere with their time-consuming care requirements. This is also evident in the studio where I cultivate plants from cuttings, propagating the necessary specimens required for artworks where they receive more attention than they might in a garden. Whether it is the exotic bloom of an orchid or the emergence of new growth from a single succulent leaf, evidence of the agency of the plants in my care continues to delight and fascinate (figure 7).

Figure 7 *Sansevieria trifasciata* 'Laurentii' cuttings 2014

Thus, the recognition of the agency of plants is key to this research. Referring to the findings of degraded and overstressed environmental systems in the *Millennium*

Ecosystem Assessment Reports[83], Val Plumwood notes that these natural systems "support human life and all other lives on earth".[84] She emphasises,

> a key cultural challenge for survival is to recognize, represent, and value the health and services these systems, collectively designated 'nature' provide for us. A high priority issue for theorists interested in changing the situation is: How we should recognize the agency of these disregarded service-providers, and how should we recognize and represent the 'environmental services' these systems provide for us?[85]

An example of the "environmental services" that Plumwood urges us to recognise is the phytoremediation of pollutants from indoor air performed by house plants.[86] While some of the city's air pollution is visible, such as the emissions from industrial facilities and vehicular traffic where exhaust fumes may be both seen and smelt, the chemical vapours emitted from the structures, surfaces, and furnishings of our built environment are more discreet. Formaldehyde is highly toxic to humans and animals, and is emitted from common construction materials, including medium-density fibre-board, particle board, and hardwood ply-board. Its botanical counter, *Chlorophytum elatum*, also known as the spider plant, was significant in NASA's "Interior Landscape Plants for Indoor Air Pollution Abatement" report for its ability to remove formaldehyde from the atmosphere.[87] More recently, *Chlorophytum comosum* has been found to take up particle matter (PM), one of the most harmful pollutants to humans.[88]

As an artist, I research the toxicity of the materials I use in my practice and take the necessary precautions for the sake of my own health and that of my studio peers. Given that many of the materials I use are general household plastics and building products commonly found in domestic environments, it is concerning to note the volatile organic compounds emitted by these seemingly inert materials. In Chapter 4, the hidden activity of 'off-gassing' by materials and the service that plants provide to humans is explored in greater detail through the rationale of my studio work. While we

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[83] For a copy of these reports please see Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, "Overview of Reports," last modified 2005, accessed 11 December 2015, http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/Global.html.
[84] Val Plumwood, "The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land," *Ethics and the Environment* 11, no. 2 (2006): 116, doi: 10.2979/ETE.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Helena Gawrońska and Beata Bakera, "Phytoremediation of Particulate Matter from Indoor Air by Chlorophytum comosum L. Plants," *Air Quality, Atmosphere & Health* 8, no. 3 (2015): 266. doi:10.1007 /s11869-014-0285-4.
[87] Wolverton, Johnson, and Bounds, "Interior Landscape Plants."
[88] Gawrońska and Bakera, "Phytoremediation of Particulate Matter," 265.

may consider our house plants as 'breathing', we do not think of the plastic container they were purchased in as doing one long, slow, toxic exhalation into our shared atmosphere.

The agency of plants may also lie in their ability to seduce us, an idea that writer Michael Pollan explores in in his examination of the reciprocity between humans and domesticated plants. He focuses on the apple, marijuana, the tulip, and the potato, and traces the plants' evolution to satisfy the human desires of sweetness, intoxication, beauty, and control (in relation to size and shape). Some plants have been particularly successful at seducing humans throughout history; for example, orchids, which are sold year round in hardware stores and supermarkets.

When a plant, no matter how quotidian, is included as part of an artwork, it becomes a focal point. While a plant may be admired as part of the overall composition of a garden or park, when isolated as a specimen away from a competing environment, a more focused view is afforded. In the case of the *Monstera deliciosa* plant that appears in two of my artworks, I was seduced by the exotic, holey leaves of the plant, finding them simultaneously sculptural, tropical, and comical. I am not alone in finding this plant an inspiration studio presence; both Henri Matisse and Judy Pfaff have also been noted to have had the plant in their studios. Numerous photographs show a *Monstera deliciosa* growing in Matisse's studio in Nice,[89] and the specimen growing in an indoor garden in Pfaff's Tivoli studio is so memorable that Jan Garden Castro was compelled to make mention of the plant in her article on Pfaff's 2014 concurrent solo exhibitions.[90] Pollan describes the moment when he realised the agency of botany, saying,

> That May afternoon, the garden suddenly appeared before me in a whole new light, the manifold delights it offered to the eye and nose and tongue no longer quite so innocent or passive. All these plants, which I'd regarded as the objects of my desire, were also, I realized, subjects, acting on me, getting me to do things for them they couldn't do themselves.[91]

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[89] An image appears in Marguerite De Sabran, "Félix Fénéon and "Art from Remote Places," *Sotheby's*, n.d., accessed 31 December 2015, http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/auction-essays/fang-mabea-statue/2014/05/flix-fnon-and-ar.html.

[90] Jan Garden Castro, "In the Studio with Judy Pfaff: the Genesis of Two Solo Exhibitions," *re:sculpt, International Sculpture Center,* 5 November 2014, accessed 31 December 2015, http://blog.sculpture.org/2014/11/05/judy-pfaff/.

[91] Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2002), xv.

It is interesting to question whether I have selected the plants used in this research or whether they have selected me. Certain research, such as the previously mentioned NASA report, has led me to particular plants. In using certain plants identified in this report, I aim to reveal their contribution in an indoor-environment.

Like Sander-Regier, geographer Russell Hitchings also found the human–plant relationship in the intimate space of the personal garden useful to test a diffuse set of Actor Network ideas. Hitchings explored the collaborative processes of human and plants (non-human actors) in creating a garden to identify how they enlightened the human understanding of these gardens. Interested only in the plant and human actors, Hitching mimicked Latour's methodology of "following the actors" and moving between "a social research paradigm of human feeling and identity and a natural science concern for plant biology and behavior" to gather information from gardeners and their plants.[92]

Hitchings identified the gardener's creativity in planning an aesthetically appealing space and that the labour involved was part of this creative process.[93] The knowledge of what plants were best suited to the environment and the notion of value (colour, texture, shape) ascribed to plants was also integral in this planning.[94] This direction and organisation were aimed at having the plants behave in the way that the gardeners desired. Hitchings also identified the way that certain plants, particularly more unusual varieties, inspired gardeners to persevere with extra care or work, saying, "what was evident here was how these different plant 'characters' would gradually draw the person down into their world, and make for an understanding of their concerns and a commitment to their care".[95]

Through observing the plants in my studio in proximity, I have become more attentive to the individual requirements of each different 'character' and over time have developed knowledge of what thrives where. I have accepted that, despite my best efforts, some plants do not flourish in the studio environment, while others have

[92] Russell Hitchings, "People, Plants and Performance: On Actor Network Theory and the Material Pleasures of the Private Garden," *Social and Cultural Geography* 4, no. 1(2003): 103, doi:10.1080./1464936032000049333.
[93] Ibid., 104.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 107.

reproduced to become the most dominant species. By including plants in my artworks, the mundaneness of the species selected has been important in establishing that even though these ordinary, commonly available species might not immediately seem remarkable, their agency has taken them from garden to gallery.

The Interconnectedness of 'Things' and the Vibrancy of Matter

Urban botanical environments nearly always contain some sort of litter, be it plastic bottles, wrappers, or bags. During a 2013 studio critique of my work, Professor Janis Jeffries, Goldsmiths, University of London, discussed an artwork in progress, *A virescent series of things connected or following in succession* (2012-15), in which I was attempting to make static plastic bags appear to grow. Surrounded by plants and plastic bin-liner bags, Jeffries drew an immediate connection between my work and Jane Bennett's text *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.[96] We discussed Bennett's text in connection to my studio experimentation. Bennett implores that when thinking about matter, we reconsider the tendency to instantly categorise something as being "passive" and "inert". [97] Through a more considered contemplation, she hopes to disrupt the common practice of separating material from life, which neglects the potential of matter to be vital, and in doing so to cultivate more ecologically sound politics.[98] She questions,

> Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of non-human powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness.[99]

This call to see the vibrancy in materials directly relates to my interest in the "off-gassing" of volatile organic compounds from plastics, building, and furnishing materials. It also connects with my attempt to make the materials in my artworks infer growth and accretion, and to maintain a sense of liveliness. In *A virescent series of*

[96] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.
[97] Ibid., vii.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., ix.

things connected or following in succession (2012–15), the fact that the plastic bags gave off a scent further demonstrated an active contribution to an environment—in this instance, the studio, and later, the gallery. By employing consumer packaging in my creative works, I sought to highlight complexities in consumer behaviour. Poignantly, Bennett asks, "How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash or "the recycling" but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?"[100]

No matter how stringent the laws against littering may be in any given city, to varying degrees, litter is part of the urban landscape. Bennett describes an urban encounter in Baltimore with a cluster of objects trapped in a storm-water drain grate: "one large men's black plastic work glove, one dense mat of oak pollen, one unblemished dead rat, one white plastic bottle cap, one smooth stick of wood".[101] She recounts the provocation that this collection of items affected on her, including repulsion and dismay, but also that the assemblage of debris "exhibited its thing-power", where the "materiality of [the objects] started to shimmer and spark . . . because of the contingent tableau they formed with each other, with the street, . . . with the weather that morning, with me".[102] Bennett's experience mirrors one of my own, which I discuss in Chapter 4, where seeing plastic flagging tape and a plastic bag caught in the branches of a tree on the banks of the Brisbane River triggered a series of feelings and thoughts about the impact of humanity on an environment. In my case, litter in a group of trees marked with flagging tape indicated both human presence through the discarded plastic bag, and some past or future human endeavour relating to the trees through the flagging tape. Bennett's comments on her specific encounter echo my own thoughts on what I had seen when she says,

> It hit me then in a visceral way how . . . materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is anti-materiality. The sheer volume of commodities, and the hyper-consumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter . . . thing-power rose from a pile of trash. Not Flower Power, Black Power, Girl Power. Thing Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.[103]

[100] Ibid., viii.
[101] Ibid., 4.
[102] Ibid., 4–5.
[103] Ibid., 5–6.

I wondered about the longevity of the plastic bag on the banks of the river, where it would eventually end up, and how long it would take to disintegrate. While litter raises these feelings of anxiety, the efficiency of cities in Australia and many other Western countries ensures that we are not confronted with our domestic and workplace rubbish long enough for it to cause us too much self-reflection. It is only when our efficient systems are interrupted that the by-products of contemporary consumer culture confront our sensibilities. Bennett's words and the thoughts they provoked were to have an immediate and ongoing effect in the studio with the way I viewed and responded to the materials used in artworks.

Contemporary Consumer Culture and Waste

> We know how much the affluence of rich societies is linked to waste, given all the talk of a "throwaway society" and the fact that some have even envisaged a "garbage-can sociology": "Tell me what you throw away and I'll tell you who you are!"
>
> —Jean Baudrillard[104]

In his visionary critique of modern consumerism as a coercive system misleading Western societies into a false sense of fulfilment, Jean Baudrillard positioned waste as having a function that gives symbolic value to affluence[105]. He interprets wastage as "defy[ing] scarcity and, contradictorily, signify[ing] abundance"[106]. He notes: "Is not the fact that the glass packaging can be thrown away the mark of the golden age?"[107] More recently, plastic bags and bottles are more commonly first conjured in a mental image of consumer packaging. For this reason, when artists use these materials in artworks, the original usefulness of the container is overshadowed by the legacy of negative associations that these ubiquitous, environmentally detrimental motifs carry. Slight shifts in perception can occur either through concealing (even temporarily) the materiality of familiar packaging, or transforming it in a way that suspends immediate value judgments that may elicit a more meaningful engagement with an audience. Hawkins suggests,

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[104] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 42.
[105] Ibid., 44–45.
[106] Ibid., 45.
[107] Ibid.

> I want to open up another way of making sense of waste beyond the trope of environmentalism. My concern is with our most quotidian relations with waste, what they mean and how they might change. I want to think about the habits and practices that shape what we do with waste.[108]

This statement connects with my desire to reveal other ways of thinking about the environment through focusing on quotidian habitation practices and places, and the interconnectedness of all residents, specifically, humans and plants.

The presence of rubbish in many cities has become omnipresent in everyday life, an irritating yet unremarkable presence on footpaths, nature strips, and traffic islands. The location of litter may dramatically affect this level of irritation, as evocatively described by Hawkins,

> Waste can generate powerful emotions. And not just bodily or organic waste—things don't have to be slimy or foul smelling to disturb us. The empty Coke can just quietly biding its time can really upset the order of things when it's encountered on a hike into pristine wilderness. You've made all this effort to get to a place where the ugly, shit end of capitalism won't be present, only to discover that your quest has been futile. A bit of rubbish has found its way into paradise and exposed all your yearnings for purity as doomed to failure.[109]

Hawkins's reaction to the ruination of "pristine wilderness" through evidence of our own species' presence is somewhat of a recent sentiment in Australia, where state and federal anti-litter movements were formed in the 1960s.[110] "Do The Right Thing" advertisements, "Tidy Towns" competitions, "Keep Australia Beautiful" and "Clean Up Australia" organisations all focused on educating individuals to take responsibility for their actions in regard to litter. Hawkins links the state of consciousness of "being rendered environmentally aware" in contemporary consumer society to the ambivalence with which we relate to waste.[111] Litter in urban environments, such as a plastic food wrapper or cigarette butts in a gutter, may at most register as mildly disgusting, but when the offending rubbish has passed through storm water drains to wind up in a waterway, its true potential for destruction is revealed. Images in Chris Jordan's *Midway: Message from the Gyre* series (2009–ongoing, figure 8)

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[108] Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*, vii.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Keep Australia Beautiful, "Our Rich History," accessed 12 August 2015, http://kab.org.au/our-rich-history/.
[111] Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 22.

simultaneously invoke repulsion, sadness, anger, and guilt. Here, the evidence of consumer behaviour is viscerally evident; however, the consumer is unidentifiable.

Figure 8 Chris Jordan *Midway: Message from the Gyre (I)* 2009

Jordan's photographic series and soon-to-be-released movie of the same name is the result of his research of Midway Atoll, which lies north-west of the Hawaiian Islands, near to what is referred to as "The Great Pacific Garbage Patch". While images such as Jordan's are frequently used to motivate changes to human behaviour, the overwhelming volume of rubbish is removed from a personal scale to one of a large faceless guilty party, and the distance from local gutter to the invisibly connected waterway affected can dilute our level of involvement. The Midway Atoll may seem like someone else's fault and someone else's problem; 'it's not my litter'. Having witnessed the regular flooding events in Brisbane and seeing the resulting increase in litter flushed through storm water drains into the Brisbane River, which then flows into Moreton Bay, I can imagine how such a vast accumulation of packaging ends up in the vortices formed by ocean currents and atmospheric winds.

Hawkins notes that "our ordinary encounters with [waste] are implicated in the making of a self and an object world"[112] and that the "everyday actions of cultivating a self . . .

[112] Ibid., 4.

are crucial for understanding how new waste habits and sensibilities might emerge".[113] She locates methods of waste removal in Foucault's "arts of existence", citing "all those actions and rules of conduct through which we organize ourselves according to particular ethical and aesthetic criteria".[114] Hawkins writes,

> The art of existence also involves habits. Habits locate us not simply in a social context but in a habitat, a specific place of dwelling or position. Our interactions with that place—what we make of it, what it makes of us—generate a mode of being or ethos that structures social behavior, often below the threshold of conscious decision making. Rosalyn Diprose reminds us that the Greek word ethos, defined as character and dwelling, gives dwelling a double meaning as both noun and verb, place and practice. And from this notion of dwelling as both habitat and habitual way of life the idea of ethics was derived.[115]

This connection of habitat, habit, and ethics is something I witness on morning walks when, if I walk early enough, I pass an elderly woman in Seven Hills who always carries a full plastic bag. She is out soon after 5.30am, even in the dark of winter. She lives in an immaculately maintained, post-war, fibro-sheet house, with a large well-kept garden. Because of her shopping bag, I used to think that when I saw her she was returning from the shops. However, I came to realise the bag she was carrying was filled with the litter that she collected from her street. While it is not her litter, it is her habitat and the presence of the litter concerns her enough to be in the habit of acting on it. Roslyn Diprose describes this relationship between habits and habitat,

> These habits are not given: they are constituted through the repetition of bodily acts the character of which are governed by the habitat I occupy. From this understanding of ethos, ethics can be defined as the study and practice of that which constitutes one's habitat, or as the problematic of the constitution of one's embodied place in the world.[116]

With more and more of our habitats becoming hybridised, without clearly defined boundaries between natural and built environments, it is necessary to find new ways to appreciate the nature within our city habitats. The focus of my research has been driven by my urban, daily lived experience, which is the also the experience of more than half of the world's population. As Bridge and Watson state,

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[113] Ibid., 7.
[114] Ibid., 24.
[115] Ibid., 25.
[116] Diprose cited in ibid.

> Whether addressing global warming requires ultimately a replacement of the capitalist economy, or a series of sweeping measures within it, advocates of both approaches might agree that cities have a crucial role as the material assemblages of the transformative potential for the environment. Now that we have reached the point in human history where, for the first time, over 50 percent of the global population live in urban areas, the environmental future of the planet is increasingly an urban one.[117]

The themes explored in this chapter have defined and guided the creative research through reflective practice and experimentation. My personal perceptions of nature and history of increasingly urban habitation have been explored in connection to Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis. The importance of developing an aesthetic appreciation of the hybrid nature of the city as both a built and natural environment has been established. The writings of Bennett and Hawkins have been shown to support my focus on the vibrancy of plants and other materials also present in the city as a way of discussing the interconnectedness of the urban environment. This research has informed and enriched my creative work and assisted in the scrutiny of artworks of other contemporary artists whose work has supported my creative research strategies.

[117] Bridge and Watson, *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Geography,* 10.

Chapter 2: Glasshouse – The Environments of Artists

> When art and nature are placed in each other's context, the understanding and appreciation of both increases. . . . For more and more people, nature no longer has any direct presence in their everyday lives, but appears in derived forms. It is increasingly the task of art and artists to adopt this altered relationship to nature as a point of departure.
>
> —Evert van Straaten[118]

Introduction

Increasing uncertainty as to the future of the planet has had a profound impact on the way that contemporary artists engage with the natural environment and the materials and practices that threaten to degrade it. In this chapter, I will discuss the specific artists whose responses to environmental ideas and issues in the twenty-first century have informed my artworks. To understand their approaches, it is important to consider the increasing concern for the environment that began in the 1960s with critical investigations that drew attention to harmful human practices.

Rachel Carson's landmark text *Silent Spring* of 1962 is frequently cited as crucial in raising mainstream awareness of ecological damage caused by pesticides.[119] The text is credited as triggering a wave of environmental activism in the late 1960s, a time of enormous social and political upheaval. 'Environmentalism', which David L. Levy defines as "a social movement and associated body of thought that expresses concern for the state of the natural environment . . . [and seeks] to limit the impact of human activities on the environment",[120] became a key motivation for certain artists, such as Helen and Newton Harrison, Agnes Denes, and Mel Chin. In Australia, photographers Peter Dombrovskis and Olegas Truchanas were prominent environmental activist artists.

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[118] Evert van Straaten, "The Vulnerability of Nature and Art," in *Windflower: Perceptions of Nature*, ed. Marente Bloemheuvel and Toos van Looten (Rotterdam, NAi Publishers, 2011), 7.
[119] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Hamilton, 1962).
[120] David L. Levy, "Environmentalism," in *Key Concepts in Critical Management Studies*, ed. Mark Tadajewski, Pauline Maclaran, Elizabeth Parsons and Martin Parker (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), 108.

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Figure 9 Peter Dombrovskis *Election Day Poster* 1983

Dombrovskis and Truchanas documented wilderness areas of Tasmania at risk of destruction through industrialisation. From the mid-1960s to early 1970s, Truchanas actively campaigned as a founding member of the Tasmanian Conservation Trust.[121] He presented slide shows of his photographic images of Lake Pedder to community groups to highlight the loss of a unique wilderness environment through flooding by the Tasmanian Hydro Electric Commission (HEC). The Wilderness Society used Dombrovskis's image *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River* (1979, figure 9) on posters and pamphlets distributed prior to the 1983 Federal Election, urging the public to use their vote to save the river from being destroyed by the HEC's planned Gordon Below Franklin Dam.[122] While the Labor Party was elected and passed

[121] Dan Sprod, "Truchanas, Olegas (1923–1972)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2002, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/truchanas-olegas-11882/.
[122] Hans Bandler, "Gordon Below Franklin Dam, Tasmania, Australia: Environmental Factors in a Decision of National Significance," *The Environmentalist* 7, no. 1 (1987): 50, and Environmental Law Australia, "Tasmanian Dam Case," accessed 2 November 2014, http://envlaw.com.au/tasmanian-dam-case/.

regulations to protect the site, the Tasmanian Liberal Government fought to proceed with the dam, a battle that resulted in the High Court case *Commonwealth v Tasmania*, with the Commonwealth successful in stopping construction.[123] Martin Thomas notes of Dombrovskis's photographs of the Tasmanian landscape that the photographer emphasised "absence as the overwhelming condition of the wild spaces he traversed", observing that "the depiction of human presence in the natural world is highly vexed, pointing to a wavering between nature and culture, alien and indigene, self and other."[124] It is interesting to imagine what Dombrovskis would make of the historical role of this now iconic image in raising the public's awareness of the remote site, which is now a popular destination for tourists seeking 'wilderness' adventures.[125]

When examining the period of art history from the late 1960s until the present, it is critical to make the distinction between the environmentalist artists who used their practice to give voice to their politics, and artists who were engaging with the environment as material and/or site. Land Art (which arose from Conceptual Art) was ostensibly a rejection of the art market and gallery system arising from conceptual art. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, land artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, and Walter De Maria all made works that engaged with and subsequently brought attention to particular sites in the landscape for reasons unrelated to environmental issues.[126] Some works required massive earth-moving equipment and resulted in permanent changes to the landscape, which garnered criticism for their impacts on the environment. In his survey of contemporary art focussed on ecology, author Andrew Brown notes, "from our perspective today, we may question the ecological ethics of these artists and their use of heavy earth-moving equipment to displace tons of natural materials and permanently scar the face of the earth in the name of art".[127]

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[123] Ibid., 50.

[124] Martin Thomas, ed., "Introduction", in *Uncertain Ground: Essays Between Art and Nature* (Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 1999), 14.

[125] The Franklin River is listed as #22 of 503 things to do in Tasmania on TripAdvisor's website with one reviewer describing his trip with *Water by Nature* tour company as "Best Trip Ever" fulfilling his desire to experience "real wilderness" and not a "Disney Trip". See John B. Palau, "Best Trip Ever," *Franklin River, TripAdvisor,* accessed 2 January 2016, https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attraction_Review-g255096-d603004-Reviews-Franklin_River-Tasmania.html

[126] I refer particularly to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969–70), De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977) and Oppenheim's *Whirlpool (Eye of the Storm* (1973).

[127] Andrew Brown, "Introduction: At the Radical Edge of Life," in *Art and Ecology Now* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd), 11.

Given the remote locations of works such as Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970, Utah, USA) it was the photographic documentation of the works that was exhibited in galleries. The only humans' presence in the landscape of 'Land Art' documentation is the heroic artworks themselves, solitary traces of the connection between artist and site, with the rest of humanity removed. However, some, like Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* (discussed later in this chapter), were literally installed into the gallery space itself.

My project has not been shaped from a distanced, solitary perspective, nor has it arisen from political activism, rather it finds more resonance with the contemporary artists discussed in this chapter. As I will describe in this chapter, artists Alan Sonfist, Judy Pfaff, Joanna Langford, Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, Patricia Piccinini, and Simon Starling all explore humanity's interconnectedness with the natural environment, critiquing various aspects of this relationship in the contemporary realm, and demonstrating curiosity rather than judgment. Some of these artists employ motifs that are known to undermine the integrity of particular landscapes, such as plastic waste, invasive exotic plants, and agricultural practices, and while these are contentious environmental topics, the artists' approaches are not overtly political. Nor do they resort to alarmist tactics or didactic methods to voice their concerns in their engaging and highly imaginative artworks. I concur with Gay Hawkins belief that political approaches can "lapse into creating moralist blueprints for changes in consciousness", denying the role of "how bodies and feelings are implicated in thinking".[128] These artists have not sought out pristine wildernesses in search of an unadulterated, human-free nature as inspiration, recognising that the twenty-first-century urban habitat is many humans' natural environment. Aspects of their practices and methodologies have resonated with my own creative research and the way I have approached the themes that are crucial to this project.

Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1978), which I visited twice during the course of my candidature, is an example of both an artwork and an urban natural environment that has shifted in meaning due to changing perceptions of the residents in its Greenwich Village neighbourhood. *Time Landscape* also demonstrates the agency of other living things—namely, wildlife, plants and humans—that share its urban location and have

[128] Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste,* 7.

contributed over time to the botanical make-up of the site. The changing role of specific urban nature spaces will also be discussed, using examples from Manhattan, one of the most densely populated cities in the Western world,[129] and home to Central Park, one of the world's most iconic urban gardens.

After discussing Sonfist's work and the nearby High Line, I move on to artists working in the twenty-first century. I identify the effectiveness of their individual artistic strategies in specific artworks and exhibitions, and offer comparisons to the methodologies employed in my own practice. Judy Pfaff's works, where synthetic and organic materials meld and morph, have been scrutinised to expand my research on the hybridity of the city. Joanna Langford's and collaborators Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger's artworks utilise consumer packaging in thought-provoking ways, and I compare their work to other artists' in relation to inherent material meanings. Patricia Piccinini's art practice is discussed, with a focus on the vibrancy of matter and contemporary consumerism. Simon Starling demonstrates humorous engagements with plants both in and beyond the gallery environment.

Artworks viewed during my candidature in Brisbane and a number of cities, including London, Melbourne, New York, Paris, Philadelphia, Rome, Singapore, Sydney, and Venice, have enriched my knowledge of the broader field of contemporary artists engaged in similar dialogues and have afforded an appreciation for the variance in local and global issues. Brisbane is still a relatively low-density city by world standards and even compared to Sydney and Melbourne. Crucial to my research and of significance is the time spent in some of these older, more densely populated cities, observing the way residents utilise public parks, balconies, and indoors to experience botany in their lives.

[129] Wendy Cox, "Largest World Cities," *New Geography,* last modified 24 April 2014, accessed 3 April 2015, http://www.newgeography.com/content/004280-largest-world-cities-2014.

Natural Manhattan: *Time Landscape*, The High Line, and *The New York Earth Room*

American artist Alan Sonfist was an emerging artist at the time that Robert Smithson and Walter De Maria were also rising in profile, but he felt no affinity with the Land Art movement, which he thought used "an entirely different vocabulary".[130] Having grown up in the urban environment of South Bronx, his appreciation of nature was shaped by his urban experience, and he reasoned,

> My feeling is that if we are going to live within a city, we have to create an understanding of the land. And that includes suburban dwellers as well. We have to come to a better understanding of who we are and how we exist on the planet.[131]

As he grew up, Sonfist witnessed the loss of natural environments in his neighbourhood through both development and arson, leading him to propose the planting of a series of forests to the Commissioner of Parks. In 1965, he devised a project in Lower Manhattan to restore a piece of land on the corner of West Houston Street and La Guardia Place to a state of native flora through the planting of ancient indigenous plant species.[132] *Time Landscape* (figures 10–11), measuring 7.76 x 12.19 metres, was planted in 1978 as "a living monument to the forest that once blanketed Manhattan Island".[133] *Time Landscape* has been described as a natural landmark and its purpose compared to the preservation of historical architectural landmarks in the Greenwich Village neighborhood.[134]

The City of New York Parks and Recreation department promotes *Time Landscape* as a "forest plot invit[ing] city dwellers—including insects, birds, people and other animals, to experience a bygone Manhattan".[135] However, this experience is from a distance, at least for humans, as the park is fenced off and the gate padlocked. The city dwellers not invited—namely, birds, squirrels, and the invasive plant species

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[130] Alan Sonfist cited in Ann Landi, "Separating the Trees from the Forest," *Artnews*, last modified 15 August 2011, accessed 24 April 2015, http://www.artnews.com/2011/08/15/separating-the-trees-from-the-forest/.
[131] Ibid.
[132] NYC Parks, "Greenstreet: Time Landscape," accessed 24 April 2015, http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/greenstreet-mz31/history.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.

transported to the site by wind and water, and the feathered and furred creatures previously mentioned—have made their way into the indigenous garden over time despite the locked fence and yearly clean-ups. Sonfist describes this as a natural progression, stating that *Time Landscape* "is an open lab, not an enclosed landscape. The intention was never to keep out all non-native species, but rather to see how they come into the space with time".[136] The 'open lab' revealed the existing systems of human, plant, animal, and material distribution in this urban habitat, and the arbitrary nature of the fence as a means of containment.

Figure 10 Alan Sonfist *Time Landscape* 1978

As time passed, it was more than the appearance of non-native plants that concerned local residents. The overgrown nature of the space made it attractive to homeless people seeking shelter.[137] Thus, as a deterrent, the trees and shrubs within the garden were heavily pruned to create clear sightlines through the foliage. Roger Ulrich notes that in urban areas where crime is an issue, "learned fear/risk associations intensify

[136] Kara Bloomgarden-Smoke, "Clean up Time for *Time Landscape* Indigenous Garden," *The Villager* (Manhattan) 77, no. 17 (26 September–2 October 2007), accessed 2 December 2012, http://thevillager.com/villager_230/cleanuptime.html.
[137] Ibid.

negative respon[ses] to settings having dense foreground vegetation that blocks surveillance".[138]

Landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh notes there is a widely held misconception that landscapes designed to appear natural are self-sufficient. Citing *Time Landscape* as an example of landscape failure due to ongoing maintenance, he says,

> Sonfist put a fence around an abandoned lot, called it *Time Landscape,* and asked us to reverentially view what nature did with the site. I suppose that in its day this was an important work of conceptual art. But now not only can this landscape not be 'inhabited', it also is truly an eyesore, or worse, not legible as a deliberate thing. It takes untouched natural landscapes several decades to sort out their long-surviving species in a way that might offer appealing visual coherence, and such a time span isn't available on disturbed urban sites like this—coherence may never exist on Sonfist's site.[139]

This lack of visual coherence and the very 'wildness' of Sonfist's landscape may be overwhelming for Manhattan residents, who are potentially enculturated to appreciate more ordered botanical environments. David W. Orr, Paul Sears Distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies and Politics at Oberlin College, refers to quintessential Manhattan resident Woody Allen's quote, "I am at two with nature", as an acknowledgement of Allen's biophobia. Explaining the role urban life plays in the enculturation of biophobia, he notes,

> Allen's aversion to nature, what can be called 'biophobia', is increasingly common among people raised with television, Walkman radios attached to their heads and video games, living amid shopping malls, freeways and dense urban or suburban settings where nature is permitted, tastefully, as decoration. More than ever we dwell in and among our own creations and are increasingly uncomfortable with the nature that lies beyond our control.[140]

On visiting *Time Landscape* in October 2012, I found it to be well-tended. I could not find much to differentiate it from other parks in the area; indeed, without its signage, it may have been indistinguishable from them. In its high-density location, it provides a botanical contrast with the surrounding buildings and provides a form of sanctuary,

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[138] Roger S. Ulrich, "Biophilia, Biophobia and Natural Landscapes," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis,* ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993), 96.
[139] Michael Van Valkenburgh, "Landscapes over Time," in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, March 2013, accessed 11 August 2014, http://landscapearchitecturemagazine.org/2013/03/14/landscapes-over-time/#more-2810.
[140] David W. Orr, "The Coming Biophilia Revolution." *Earth Island Journal* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 38.

particularly for birds and squirrels now that there is no human access. Sonfist's visionary comment on the artwork in 1968 registered the agency of other living beings in an ecosystem when he noted that "increasingly, as we come to understand our dependence on nature, the concept of community expands to include non-human elements". Perhaps the evolution of the work into a community of multiple species, plant, animal, and human aligns with Sonfist's original conceptual intentions.[141]

In order to comply with copyright the image has been removed.

Figure 11 Alan Sonfist *Time Landscape* 1978 (detail) 2012

Does an audience engage with this work through a framework of art aesthetics or one of environmental aesthetics? I experienced *Time Landscape* as an engaging botanical environment, finding the variation in plant species aesthetically pleasing. Furthermore, knowing Sonfist's conceptual framework, I believe it to have enduring relevance as an artwork. From a residential perspective, Director of the local residents group the SoHo

[141] Alan Sonfist, "Natural Phenomena as Public Monuments (1968)," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings,* ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 624.

Alliance, Sean Sweeney, sees *Time Landscape* as an artwork, albeit negatively, calling it "a piece of 80's art".[142] Sweeney claims that the time has come for alternative uses for the land to be considered. Artists and researchers Reiko Goto Collins and Timothy M. Collins believe that the reception of *Time Landscape* as an artwork is challenged by its operation on three levels: as a sculptural idea; a purely visual artwork (since access is not possible); and as something that fosters general interest in preservation of the historical fabric of both buildings and forest.[143] I responded to *Time Landscape* as an artwork perhaps because of the injunction on entering the work, with the locked fence acting as a frame.

From an environmental aesthetic perspective, Emily Brady declares Sonfist's "pre-colonial forest ecosystem" successful as a community green space but refutes that the work can be reducible to a natural environment.[144] In his criticism of Environmental Art in regards to environmental aesthetics, Allen Carlson describes some artwork as being an affront (or insult) to nature, even when they cause no environmental damage.[145] He judged *Time Landscape* as not committing an affront to nature *only* insofar as he does not consider it an artwork.[146] Similarly, Carlson cites work by Christo and Jeanne Claude as "temporary insults" to the landscape.[147] For example, Christo and Jeanne Claude's *Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida* (1980–83, figure 12) temporarily introduced 603,870 square metres of floating pink woven polypropylene fabric to a natural environment, creating a spectacle that the artists stated "was a work of art underlining the various elements and ways in which the people of Miami live, between land and water".[148] While the artists made no claim of the work being an act of environmentalism, they do note on their website that in preparation for installation, forty tons of garbage was removed from the islands. No statement is made as to how the polypropylene was disposed of after the event.

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[142] Bloomgarden-Smoke, "Clean up Time for *Time Landscape*."
[143] Reiko Goto Collins and Timothy M. Collins, "Art and Living Things: The Ethical Aesthetic Impulse," in *Human-Environment Relations: Transformative Values in Theory and Practice*, ed. Emily Brady and Pauline Phemister (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 124, doi:10.1007/978-94-007-2825-7_10.
[144] Emily Brady, "Aesthetic Regard for Nature in Environmental and Land Art," *Ethics, Place & Environment: A Journal of Philosophy and Geography* 10, no. 3 (2008): 295–96.
[145] Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 156.
[146] Ibid., 157.
[147] Ibid., 156.
[148] Christo and Jeanne-Claude, "Surrounded Islands," accessed 3 January 2016, http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/surrounded-islands?view=info#.VbhO0YvrPGs.

Figure 12 Christo and Jeanne Claude *Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida* 1980–83

Carlson's refusal to appreciate the environmental aesthetic potential in Sonfist's *Time Landscape* as an artwork seems arbitrary and idealistic, and his insistence that only the pristine environments are worthy of such appreciation refutes the benefits of a range of urban botanical environments. *Time Landscape* is a topical site to consider the debate within environmental aesthetics as it defies categorisation, operating to varying degrees as both artwork and natural environment.

Sonfist's attempted reclaiming of a pre-seventeenth-century Manhattan wilderness is now legislated by the NYC Parks Department, which also controls the nearby High Line Public Park in Chelsea (figure 13). Utilising an elevated freight rail that was built in the 1930s and decommissioned in 1980, and extending from Gansevoort Street in the Meatpacking District to West 34th Street between 10th and 12th Avenues, the wildness of the disused railway tracks was transformed between 2004 and 2014

through the addition of landscaped trees, grasses, and shrubs. This created an elevated botanical walkway that has become a major Manhattan tourist attraction.

Figure. 13 The High Line, Manhattan 2012

This site has been the cause of much debate since its inception. Criticism focuses on the gentrification and subsequent rise in property prices that has ensued to cater for the influx of tourists.[149] In contrast, supporters credit the park with making the neighbourhood cleaner and safer.[150] The park is a biophobe's delight—the natural elements are contained, controlled, and, in the endless stream of pedestrian traffic, only very briefly encountered. Perhaps there is reason to be fearful of less manicured environs: in the last decade, ten lawsuits have been filed as the result of injuries and

[149] Kelly Chan, "Getting to the Bottom of the High Line Controversy: How Good Design Spurred Chelsea's Gentrification," *BlouinArtInfo International*, 24 August 2012, http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/821368/getting-to-the-bottom-of-the-high-line-controversy-how-good-design-spurred-chelseas-gentrification.
[150] Ibid.

fatalities caused by falling tree branches in Central Park.[151] However, as Simon Schama reminds us,

> Central Park was always supposed to answer both arcadian myths that have survived in the modern memory: the wild and the cultivated; the place of unpredictable exhilaration and the place of bucolic rest. Olmsted could have had no inkling, of course, how the very features that made his park unique—the sunken roads, the gullies and hollows that closed off views to the streets—would shelter a savagery at which even Pan himself might have flinched. . . . Central Park divides its arcadian life by the hours of the clock. By day it is all nymphs and shepherds, cupids and *fêtes champêtres*. But at night it reverts to a more archaic place, the realms of Pelasgus where the wolf-men of Lykaon prowl, satyrs bide their time unsmiling, and feral men, hungry for wilding, postpone their music.[152]

These sites in Manhattan—Sonfist's *Time Landscape* attempting to recreate an indigenous environment; The High Line, a contemporary park built upon a disused railway; and Central Park, a historical park designed to retain the "picturesquely-varied, rocky formations of the [Manhattan] island"[153]—are evidence of humans' evolving relationship with botanical nature in the face of increasing urbanisation. I have examined these sites to enrich notions of what constitutes a natural environment in contemporary urban society, noting that the increasing hybridity of such spaces calls for new ideas of aesthetic appreciation. While savanna-like settings might once have been most suitable for survival, enculturation in contemporary cities suggests that within the urban environment, natural environments with clear sight lines and safe paths make residents feel safer, even when their feet don't actually connect with the earth—as is the case in the elevated High Line. Not far from the High Line is an artwork that brings the substance of 'earth' indoors and that, I argue, creates a profound urban experience with nature.

Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* was constructed in 1977 and has been on public view since 1980 in a SoHo loft (figure 14). The artwork, commissioned and maintained by the DIA foundation, is described as an "interior earth sculpture", 127,300 kilograms of soil to be precise.[154] Viewing this artwork in 2014 had a profound

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[151] William Glaberson and Lisa W. Foderaro, "Neglected, Rotting Trees Turn Deadly," *The New York Times*, 13 May 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/14/nyregion/in-new-york-neglected-trees-prove-deadly.html?_r=0.
[152] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995), 570.
[153] Fredrick Olmsted, landscape architect and co-designer of Central Park, cited in ibid., 569.
[154] DIA Art Foundation, "Walter De Maria, The New York Earth Room," accessed 1 February 2015, http://www.diaart.org/sites/page/52/1365.

effect on me as I was filled with a feeling of reverential awe and found the stillness of the space palpable. The earth here seemed to exaggerate the emptiness of the loft, and the smell of the soil evoked my childhood memories of farms with vast ploughed paddocks and wide-open skies. The acoustic qualities of the loamy soil seemed to absorb any noise and activity made by the viewers, offering an experience of profound quietude in 'the city that never sleeps'. My experience of *The New York Earth Room* was not unlike visiting a church or cathedral—the calm, solemnity and stillness of the room lit only by sunlight—a place of worship for the urban biophile. With no artificial light to illuminate the dirt to reiterate its role as art subject, there is a sense of calm in the loft—the daylight seen through windows alludes to natural rhythms and time. The space seemed ripe with potential, like a fertile field lying fallow, waiting for something to germinate. The earth positively radiated vitality.

Figure 14 Walter De Maria *The New York Earth Room* 1977

Thinking about the materiality of the contained soil in *The New York Earth Room* transported my thoughts outside the loft space, connecting to ideas and associations with the earth outside. For me, the way the work compartmentalises nature in an interior urban space might be seen as generating an environmentalist reading, where nature is a commodity in an increasingly urbanised society. Indeed, for the city

gardener, soil is an expensive material purchased in brightly packaged plastic bags and available as specialty mixes to suit particular plants. The poignancy of this work may lie in the fact that, for over thirty years, an enormous volume of soil not covered by concrete or asphalt has remained indoors like some strange relic, occupying some of the world's most expensive real estate. While there are still vacant blocks in Manhattan where the ground is visible, they did not evoke in me the same connections to a wider world. In *The New York Earth Room*, there is no litter to mar its purity, no footprint, human or otherwise—no weeds, just earth. It is seemingly hyper natural earth, despite its domestic setting.

In my Brisbane studio, my thoughts are also transported by contained soil. In *The New York Earth Room*, a Plexiglas[155] barrier holds the dirt in, and it is seeing soil through this barrier that allows the viewer to appreciate the depth and volume contained in the space. In my studio, I strike plant cuttings in clear, round plastic containers, the soil visible through the sides. When my attention is drawn to new growth emerging from the soil, I become aware of other things residing within the containers such as insects and small fungi. I can sometimes see the root systems of the plants below the surface. I appreciate that each plastic tub is an ecosystem within the larger ecosystem of the studio. As the way humans encounter nature is affected by residing in cities, what we come to appreciate as nature changes. Intimate encounters offering a few simple natural elements—a balcony garden, a potted plant, a room filled with a layer of earth—may satiate our biophilic desires. Cultivating a focus and appreciation for these mundane botanical experiences can remind us of the connection to a wider natural world. Contemporary artists may play a role in developing this appreciation by bringing these connections to life in the gallery.

[155] Plexiglas is an acrylic sheet trade name used in this document where the artist or gallery has specified.

Judy Pfaff: Second Nature

In October 2014 during a residency in Philadelphia, I had the opportunity to see American artist Judy Pfaff's concurrent exhibitions *Run Amok* at Loretta Howard Gallery (figure 15) and *Second Nature* at Pavel Zoubok Gallery (figures 16 and 17) in New York. On seeing *Second Nature*, I felt an instantaneous sense of connection to Pfaff's hybrid world. Eleanor Heartney notes that while both these exhibitions "paid homage to the distinction between the forces of nature and the effects of human activity . . . what was most strongly conveyed was the chaos that comes from their intermingling".[156] This chaotic intermingling is the reality of the urban environment, and far from chaotic, I found a sense of familiar urban order in Pfaff's simultaneously formal yet exuberant works. As Alexandra C. Anderson identifies in her catalogue essay,

> The assembling process, while it may appear random and largely improvisational, is actually governed by Pfaff's strict and disciplined attention to underlying structures upon which she subsequently builds, or better yet, extemporizes, using unpredictable found objects, unusual textures, wild color and appropriated industrial fragments and materials.[157]

Figure 15 Judy Pfaff *There Is a Field, I Will Meet You There (Rumi)* 2014

[156] Eleanor Heartney, "Judy Pfaff: Loretta Howard and Pavel Zoubok, October 18 to November 15," *Art News* 114, no. 2 (February 2015), 82.
[157] Alexandra C. Anderson, "Nature and Culture: Total Immersion," in *Judy Pfaff: Second Nature / Run Amok* (New York: Pavel Zoubok Gallery, Loretta Howard Gallery, 2014), 3, http://issuu.com/lorettahoward/docs/judypfaff_issu.

Just as botany in the built environment organically weaves around the geometry of architecture, so Pfaff's work sets up a dynamic tension by both contrasting and tempering the chaos in her works with ordered substructures. This is achieved through the physical frameworks in her sculptural forms that provide a structure for the other materials used. In the case of *There Is a Field, I Will Meet You There (Rumi)* (2014, figure 15), those materials are Plexiglas, fluorescent lights, plastic, and expanded foam. The artist takes the same approach with the composition of her print works and the way in which these works are installed. Gridded prints contrast with organic sculptural forms (figure 16) and framed works hung over grids of images (figure 17).

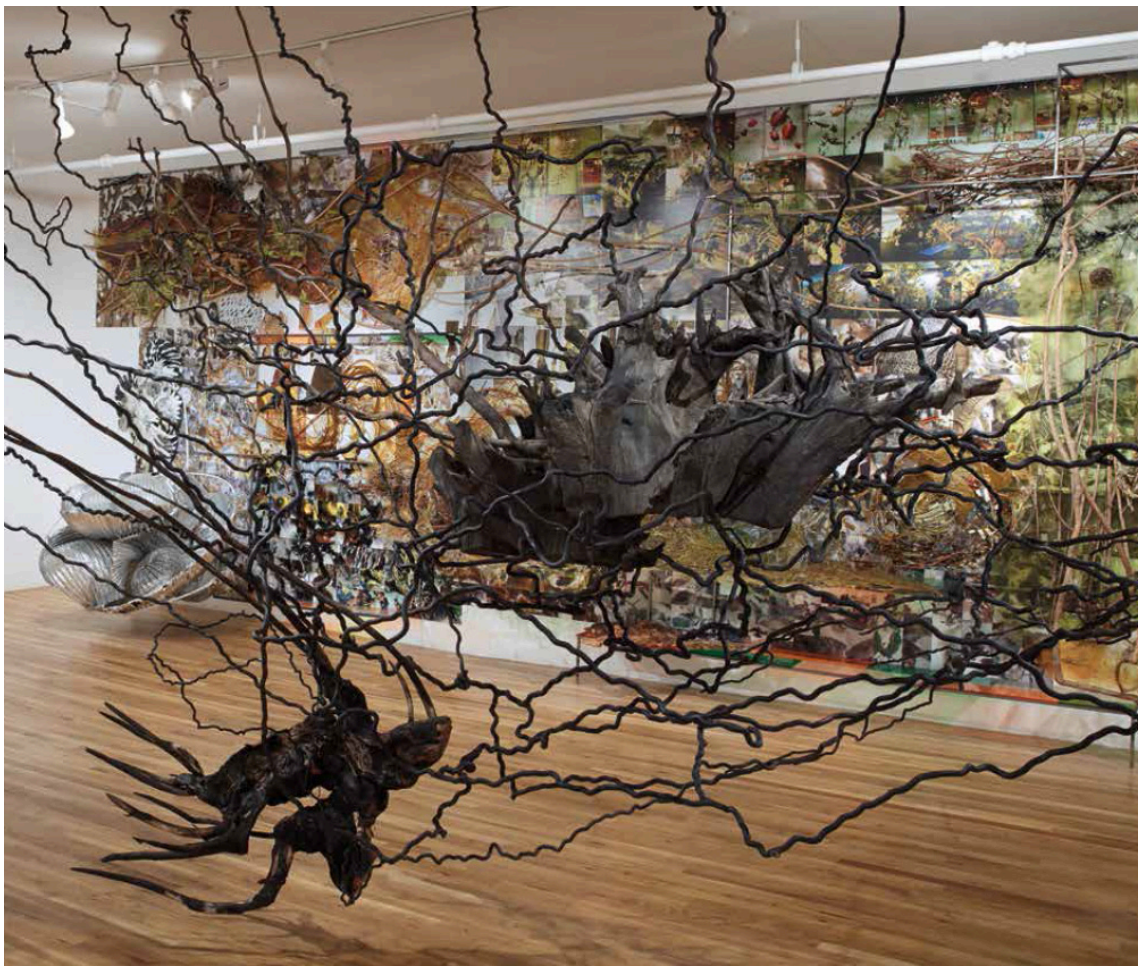

Figure 16 Judy Pfaff *Hanging Judge* (centre) 2014 and *Let Sixteen Cowboys Sing Me a Song* (far wall) 2014

Figure 17 Judy Pfaff *Second Nature* (installation view) 2014

The material and conceptual hybridity of *Second Nature* resonated strongly with me. Pfaff's fascination with flora as a subject was evident in the mixed-media two-dimensional works containing botanical references, and the presence of plant matter in her sculptural works. In both instances, Pfaff then transformed the familiar subject material into ambiguous, fantastical forms, the combination of natural and artificial materials amplifying the organic aesthetic of some of the synthetic elements; for instance, the paper lantern on the right side of *Cahoots* (2014, figure 18). The other materials are imbued with life, appearing to grow and ooze from this synthetic shell.

Figure 18 Judy Pfaff *Cahoots* 2014

Cahoots also reminded me of the discovery of a new stone, the plastiglomerate, identified by scientists at Kamilo Beach in Hawaii.[158] A paper co-authored by geologist Patricia L. Corcoran, oceanographer Charles J. Moore, and artist Kelly Jazvac describes the plastiglomerate as consisting of melted plastic, beach sediment, basaltic lava fragments and organic debris (figure 19).[159] Plastiglomerates register the preservation of plastics in the earth's rock record, meaning the material "has great potential to form a marker horizon of human pollution, signalling the occurrence of the informal Anthropocene epoch".[160]

Figure 19 Kelly Jazvac *Recent Landscapes (plastiglomerate)* 2014

Speaking in 1992, comedian and social critic George Carlin appeared to foresee the existence of a material such as plastiglomerate saying,

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[158] Patricia L Corcoran, Charles J. Moore and Kelly Jazvac, "An Anthropogenic Marker Horizon in the Future Rock Record," *GSA Today* 24, no. 6 (6 June 2014): 4, accessed 6 October 2015, http://www.geosociety.org/gsatoday/archive/24/6/article/i1052-5173-24-6-4.htm.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Ibid. The Anthropocene is defined as an epoch "in which human activities have had a tangible impact on the earth's ecosystems", with debate as to whether the period begins with the rise of agriculture or the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. See Noel Castree, Rob Kitchin, and Alisdair Rogers, "Anthropocene," in *A Dictionary of Human Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), accessed 1 January 2016, Oxford Reference.

> The planet will be here for a long, long, *long* time after we're gone, and it will heal itself . . . [be]cause that's what it does. It's a self-correcting system. . . . And if it's true that plastic is not degradable, well, the planet will simply incorporate plastic into a new paradigm: the earth plus plastic. The earth doesn't share our prejudice toward plastic. Plastic came out of the earth. The earth probably sees plastic as just another one of its children. Could be the only reason the earth allowed us to be spawned from it in the first place. It wanted plastic for itself. Didn't know how to make it. Needed us. Could be the answer to our age-old egocentric philosophical question "Why are we here?"[161]

My prior research on plastiglomerates (undertaken while making my artwork *Jardinière* in 2014) also came to mind when, on my way to view Judy Pfaff's New York exhibitions, I viewed a site-specific artwork at the High Line, *The Evolution of God* (2014–15, figure 20), by Adrián Villar Rojas. Thirteen cubes, each originally measuring 115cm^3, were designed to disintegrate during the course of the exhibition, the organic matter vulnerable to weather conditions. Ashley Tickle describes the work as follows,

> layers clashing temporalities, revealing ecological concerns and a fascination for the "deep time" history of our planet . . . resembl[ing] archaeological sites where the future is simultaneously excavated and entombed. As his works incorporate a mixture of animal, mineral, and vegetal ingredients, their metamorphosis over time inherently reflects the material qualities of each of these primordial elements. His sculptures exhibit an animal growth, decay, and repose; a vegetal sprouting and composting; and a mineral, tectonic cracking and settling.[162]

The layers of clay and concrete laced with human-made materials, including clothing, sneakers, and rope, appear as if they could have been excavated from one of the surrounding building sites. Seeds embedded in the sculptures sprouted from cracks in the cubes, their growth both a contrast to the decay of the cube, and a connection to the surrounding plant life of the High Line. Reflecting on the work, Villar Rojas says, "This is the basics of life on earth. . . . Inside [the cubes] you have all these tiny things that are happening, going back to billions of years ago when the first primitive organisms appeared. This is it. This is the primordial soup."[163] The artist believes that he experienced humans' evolutionary connection to nature in making the cubes, speculating,

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[161] Carlin, George, "George Carlin: Saving The Planet," YouTube video, 8:03, posted by "Dadniel", 21 October 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7W33HRc1A6c.
[162] Ashley Tickle, "High Line Art Presents Adrián Villar Rojas 'The Evolution Of God', a Major New Site-Specific Sculptural Installation at The High Line at the Rail Yard," Press release, 21 September 2014, http://assets.thehighline.org/original_site/press/highlineart/AdrianVillarRojas-0914.pdf.
[163] Adrian Villard Rojas cited in Andy Battalion, "High Line Opens Last Section with Adrián Villar Rojas Sculptures," in *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 September 2014, accessed 23 March 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/high-line-opens-last-section-with-adrian-villar-rojas-sculptures-1411076002.

> It has this kind of childish attitude, playing with mud and soil, vegetables and seeds. Our first moments as hominids and homo sapiens were all linked to a relation with nature and agriculture and farming. We humans have a super-strong connection. The moment you work with soil, you feel some sort of pleasure in reconnection.[164]

Figure 20 Adrián Villar Rojas *The Evolution of God* 2014–15

As I walked the streets of Chelsea having seen the work of Pfaff and Villar Rojas, I felt synergies were emerging with the work I was making and the artists I had seen in this metropolis, enriching the possibilities of what constitutes a natural environment in contemporary urban society. The commingling of humans and other living things in this vibrant, hybrid ecosystem constantly revealed intriguing entanglements of the built and natural environments. The influences of the urban environment were evident in both Pfaff's and Villar Rojas's work. It could be seen in the building sites nearby where massive pits revealed the foundations of the structures yet to rise out of the

[164] Ibid.

ground—strata of earth and human-made materials (figure 21). The bright colours in Pfaff's works were ubiquitous on the streets where fluorescent colours compete with the constant noise and movement. The layers of detritus in Villar Rojas's sculptural cubes were echoed in the clear plastic garbage bags on the city streets—items fallen out of favour now destined for landfill (figure 22).

Figure 21 Building site in Chelsea, Manhattan 2014

Robert Sullivan's evocative description of a garbage hill outside Manhattan illustrates the persistence of waste materials' vitality,

> The garbage hills are alive . . . there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen free communities [that] multiply and even evolve so that they can more readily digest the trash at their disposal. . . . After having ingested the tiniest portion of leftover New Jersey or New York, these cells then exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm, moist methane, giant stillborn tropical winds that seep through the ground to feel the Meadowlands' fires, or creep into the atmosphere where they eat away at the Earth-protecting layer of Ozone.[165]

[165] Robert Sullivan, "Valley of the Garbage Hills," in *The Meadowlands: Wilderness Adventures on the Edge of New York City* (London: Granta Publications, 2006 (1998), 96.

Echoes in these ideas of the vitality of waste materials can also be seen in the work of Joanna Langford whose practice also supports my argument that the utilisation of consumer packaging can reveal the materials' enduring liveliness.

Figure 22 Garbage on a footpath in Chelsea, Manhattan 2014

Joanna Langford: Waste Lands

Joanna Langford's installations draw inspiration from the geography of her homeland, New Zealand. Langford seeks to employ the very materials that pose a threat to, or are used to alter, New Zealand's natural environment. Her practice is representative of contemporary currents within art that critique the effects of the waste produced through industrial and agricultural practices as well as consumer packaging. *Crawl Space* (2012, figure 23) was exhibited in the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial at the

Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. The work is described as "appear[ing] to emerge from the ground".[166] However, when I viewed the work, its connection to the floor seemed less an emergence than a gentle alighting of the plastic and wire constructions on the earth's surface.

Figure 23 Joanna Langford *Crawl Space* 2012

With an arachnoid presence that recalls Louise Bourgeois's *Crouching Spider* (2003, figure 24), the works are suspended from the ceiling with nylon line, adding to their gravitational orientation. The tattered industrial wrapping material of pale-green plastic silage[167] wrap alludes to a botanical presence reminiscent of seaweed. The network of miniature white and safety orange scaffolding seems positioned to observe the artificial, mountainous landscape, yet the barrier surrounding the work is also a scaled down-version of fencing used on building sites to keep the site secure. In the gallery

[166] Andrea Bell, "Joanna Langford: Imagined Worlds," in *The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7)*, (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, 2012), 145.
[167] Silage is a fermented livestock food made from green crops; see "Silage," in *A Dictionary of Plant Sciences*, ed. Michael Allaby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), accessed 1 January 2016, Oxford Reference.

space, Langford's miniature barrier directed the flow of traffic and also discouraged entry into the fragile floating world.

Figure 24 Louise Bourgeois *Crouching Spider* 2003

Crawl Space contrasts a geometric framework that alludes to construction with the fragile floating mountains described by Langford as "a new synthetic landscape (the city)".[168] The work also implies a very tentative balance between the worlds of the built and the natural. The temporality of the pale-green plastic has a direct visual and material connection to discarded and weathered plastic found outdoors as litter. This association and its use to create a form that infers vegetation or terrain alludes to potential environmental peril—transforming the plastic from something lifeless to something vital with the potential for further alteration. However, I believe that the work would have benefitted from some of the green, organically shaped plastic straying into the geometric structures in the work, as the artist has done in *The High Country* (2012, figure 25). I encountered a similar issue in my artwork, *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* (2012), and the strategies I used to overcome this are discussed in Chapter 4.

[168] Ibid.

Figure 25 Joanna Langford *The High Country* 2012

The High Country (2012, figures 25 and 26) was described by curator Blair French as reflecting Langford's interest in the "unsettled, unstable changing condition of landscape—its dynamic morphic quality".[169] This quality of the landscape was something the artist had to contend with when the installation of the work was delayed twice by earthquakes in New Zealand, first in Canterbury in 2010 and then again in Christchurch in 2011. It was finally installed in Christchurch in November 2012. Constructed from plastic milk containers and silage wrap, the work links the recognisable consumer container with the less recognisable industrial packaging used by the dairy industry. *The High Country* brings to mind Italo Calvino's fictitious city of Leonia where "perhaps the whole world, beyond Leonia's boundaries, is covered by craters of rubbish, each surrounding a metropolis in constant eruption".[170]

Through the materials used to construct *The High Country*, Langford reminds us that prior to becoming waste, the detritus of the dairy industry—the industrial silage used to wrap livestock food, and the plastic containers used to package the milk—were formerly useful. Sometimes, the potency of negative associations of plastic packaging as a metaphor for environmental threat can obscure its original intended purpose and usefulness. *The High Country* suggests profusion elegantly, conveying Langford's ideas with clarity through the inference of the liveliness of her materials. Langford's work creatively explores systems in place that contribute to waste while avoiding

[169] Blair French, "Joanna Langford: The High Country," *Art & Australia*, 49, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 314.
[170] Italo Calvino, 1974, *Invisible Cities*, translated by William Weaver (London: Random House), 102.

environmentalist reprimands or presenting an artwork that evokes an instantaneous reaction of revulsion (such as Chris Jordan's work, figure 8). By countering the presence of materials that have negative connotations with more intricate elements in her work—for example, the scaffolding in *Crawl Space*—Langford invites an engagement beyond an immediate reaction to spectacle through scale or volume, allowing time for the consideration of the concepts presented. This is something I have also paid attention to in my artworks where I use consumer packaging.

Figure 26 Joanna Langford *The High Country* (detail) 2012

Simultaneously representing both consumption and waste, plastic bags are one of the most iconic types of consumer packaging associated with pollution. Seen en masse, either in the kitchen drawer or the gallery, they may be a worrying sight. However, relying on vast quantities of material alone can be less effective in works such as Pascale Marthine Tayou's *Plastic Bags* (2001–10, figure 27). Although it is described as an "ominous spectacle of consumerism that hangs from the ceiling, as if threatening to spill its junk on the gallery floor",[171] there is no junk, the bags hang limp and lifeless, empty and in pristine condition, making it hard to imagine that they were ever full. Tayou's sculpture has a formal aesthetic appeal; the plastic bags used are

[171] Nicholas Chambers, "21st Century Recession Art," in *21st Century: Art in the First Decade*, ex. cat., ed. Miranda Wallace (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, 2010), 43.

brightly coloured and carefully arranged to create the large, regular form. While the work's scale gives it a formidable presence, it is decidedly static, the impotence of the flaccid bags detracting from their potential to appear threatening. In Chapter 4, I discuss my use of plastic bags in artworks, arguing that while the aesthetic appeal of bright colours can counteract the more menacing aspects in a work, this allure requires a contrast. I argue that by constructing plastic bags into forms that hold visible tension and appear to grow, the dilemma of consumer desire and potential environmental threat is both more evident and more engaging. The seduction of consumerism is inferred as well as the botanical environment that the plastic bags pose a threat to.

In order to comply with copyright the image has been removed.

Figure 27 Pascale Marthine Tayou *Plastic Bags*
2001–10

One can negate the menace inherent in the materiality of plastic bags to the point of rendering them enchanting, yet still allude to ideas of social behaviour surrounding our relationship to waste. An example of this is Korean artist Gimhongsok, who makes plastic garbage bags seem simultaneously ephemeral and permanent. In the comical

Canine Construction (2009, figure 28), proposed as a potential public artwork, the materiality of the garbage bags is transformed by casting them in resin. The texture, lightness, and detail captured in the resin is so visually convincing that the sculpture begs to be touched for confirmation that it will not yield to pressure. The only aspects that belie this lightness are the tied bag ends that form the dog's ears and tail, relentless in their verticality.

Figure 28 Gimhongsok *Canine Construction* 2009

More mutt than art-world pedigree, the work bears a lowbrow resemblance to Jeff Koons's *Balloon Dog* (1994–2000, figure 29). While *Canine Construction* evokes ideas of mundane, domestic, and personal consumerism, Koons's *Balloon Dog* embodies the shinier, elitist capitalism of the art market. *Canine Construction*'s familiar form of plump garbage bags gives the sculpture a universal humility. Gimhongsok highlights the participatory aspect of humans in bagging garbage, noting, "because there are not set guidelines for the use of plastic bags, this dynamic social narrative is a totally

spontaneous manifestation and can be seen as a true social agreement."[172] Here, one can relate back to Hawkins who describes the act of putting out the garbage as,

> a cultural performance, an organised sequence of material practices that deploys certain technologies, bodily techniques and assumptions. And in this performance waste matter is both defined and removed; a sense of order is established and a particular subject is made. Waste then, isn't a fixed category of things, it is an effect of classifications and relations.[173]

Figure 29 Jeff Koons *Balloon Dog (Blue)* 1994–2000

Even as a public artwork in a natural environment, the quirky presence of *Canine Construction* would invite contemplation before potentially setting off environmental alarms. These garbage bags are contained, their contents secure. The social role in the containment of garbage has been executed with precision and humour.

Once the personal performance of taking out the garbage is complete, it is easy to forget the infrastructure that removes our discarded matter to some remote location where the sight and smell of our excesses no longer trouble us. Our rubbish dumps as well as our sewerage treatment plants and water reservoirs reside beyond the urban fringe. Our connection to these places is mostly buried underground, and only

[172] Gimhongsok cited in Reuben Keehan, "Gimhongsok: Irreconcilable Differences," in *The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, 118.
[173] Hawkins, "The Ethics of Waste," 2.

revealed during a building's construction or demolition (as described previously). *The Water Hole* (2008, figures 30–33) by Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger reveals the path of the urban water supply, critiquing the impact on consumer behaviour on the natural environment. In the next section, I discuss this work to illustrate how adopting a viewpoint at a remove from the issue at hand may appear condescending, or worse accusatory, particularly when a sense of personal scale is overwhelmed in an installation.

Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger: *The Water Hole*

Swiss artists Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger create immersive environments that explore the interconnectedness of humans to the natural world, sometimes highlighting human ambivalence to this relationship. In their large-scale work *The Waterhole* (2008), installed at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, the artists critiqued aspects of consumer culture affecting the environment while simultaneously revealing hidden of aspects of urban infrastructure. The installation, which explored Melbourne's water supply in the face of the longest drought in the region's history, comprised a series of interlinking rooms within in the gallery: a silver tunnel that led to a lookout to view the waterhole; a kaleidoscopic video installation; the waterhole itself; a space for contemplation; and a laboratory space containing a desalination plant for tears.

The Water Hole came at a time where Melbourne residents were highly sensitive to critique of their water consumption. With Stage 3 water restrictions in place, residents had to make changes to the most intimate aspects of their daily lives. Toilet and bathing habits were altered,[174] and households endeavoured to recycle water wherever possible. Steiner and Lenzlinger articulate the journey of water from storage dam to urban household in their artists' catalogue statement, saying,

> The dammed water rushes down to the boomtown in a huge pipe, branching into millions of smaller pipes to end up in sinks, basins, toilets, showers, bathtubs—the urban water holes. And between the fern tree gully and the wet sponge to

[174] In regard to toilet flushing, a popular expression at the time was "If it's brown, flush it down; if it's yellow, let it mellow." Timed showers were strongly recommended, with baths considered an act of wanton waste.

> clean the car lays a dried-up landscape. Isn't it strange that the rituals humans perform around their urban water holes, mainly locked up in small rooms, are all about spoiling the water?[175]

Figure 30 Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger *The Water Hole* 2008

The artists' preparatory research began a year in advance, building on their existing knowledge of the city from a visit in 1999 when they participated in Melbourne's only Biennial.[176] Significant to their engagement with both location and community were a three-month residency in Melbourne and a pivotal field trip to the Upper Yarra Reservoir, which is located approximately one hundred kilometres from the city centre. Travelling through the suburbs to the reservoir, they noticed the extent that the city had sprawled in ten years, and the lack of natural environments incorporated into new housing developments. From this initial exploration, Steiner and Lenzlinger

[175] Steiner and Lenzlinger, "The Water Hole," in Juliana Engberg, Gerda Steiner, and Jörg Lenzlinger, *Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger: The Water Hole (*Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2009), 4.
[176] Gerda Steiner, "Interview with Shelley Hinton," *Australian Centre for Contemporary Art* (website), accessed 2 May 2012, http://www.accaonline.org.au/GerdaSteinerJorgLenzlinger.

determined that their installation would take the form of a waterhole, which they related to the waterhole in Indigenous dreamtime stories.[177] The artwork more directly connected ideas of the urban supply of water as a valuable resource at risk from human activity impacting the natural environment.

Figure 31 Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger *The Water Hole* (detail) 2008

The artists used diverse methods to attract the viewers' attention, so that each interlinked area provided a different sensory experience. For example, a tunnel constructed from tree branches and insulation foil rustled as one walked through the space, creating an instant awareness of the body's impact on the environment. Curator Juliana Engberg notes of this experience that "immediately you have a sense that you are a destructive force of change".[178] The central waterhole space was one of chaotic excess, described by Urszula Dawkins in *Art Monthly* as "a near-living thicket

[177] Ibid.
[178] Juliana Engberg, "47°C in the Shade," in *Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger: The Water Hole,* 66.

of PVC piping, coloured household buckets, artificial flower-parts, plastic drink bottles and gaudy crystals".[179]

Steiner and Lenzlinger often use plastic packaging sourced at the site of their investigation, so that the labelling on the litter is familiar to local audiences. This methodology of using recognisable consumer packaging has attracted criticism in the past. Reviewer Henry Lehmann described their installation in Montreal as "pompous…thrown together" and taking the "theme of urban bleakness . . . to comic extremes".[180] Construed as an accusatory gesture, Steiner and Lenzlinger's use of consumer packaging in their installation in Montreal National Park in 2001 offended Lehmann's civic pride when he stated,

> In this work, Montreal is transformed into a nightmare of pollution and wilful ignorance. . . . [T]here's a hit and miss aspect about the piece, at once deeply bitter and devil-may-care. It seems the two artists came to Canada and the New World in search of paradise on Earth only to discover plastic wrappers blowing in the wind.[181]

The perception of the artists' judgmental stance is echoed in Dawkins's review in her wry comment, "we've made our environmental bed; now it's time to lie in it."[182] This research has made me cognisant of the possibility of being construed in this way when using consumer packaging. In Chapter 4, I discuss the creative techniques I have used in my work to avoid this misunderstanding, particularly work *Jardinière* (2014) which is largely constructed from plastic packaging. In acknowledgment of my participation in consumer culture, I identify the plastic packaging as being sourced from my own household waste. Waste, as a noun or a verb, can invoke a degree of guilt in Western society. Waste is known to be the byproduct of more affluent economies, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics cites international evidence that economic growth contributes to the increase in waste generated per person.[183] Robert Smithson held a similar view in 1973, when he commented,

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[179] Urszula Dawkins, "Pipe Dreams: Steiner and Lenzlinger's *The Water Hole*," *Art Monthly Australia* 220 (June 2009), 52.
[180] Henry Lehmann, "Adams Brings Whimsy to Life: Childhood Fantasies Become Monstrosities," *The Gazette* (Montreal), 30 June 2001, accessed 15 October 2015.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Dawkins, "Pipe Dreams," 52.
[183] Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Waste," *Australia's Environment: Issues and Trends, Jan 2010*, last modified 2 May 2010, accessed 12 September 2015, http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf /Lookup/7EBBE339D6A3C2DBCA2576C000193942?opendocument.

> It seems that when one is talking about preserving the environment or conserving energy or recycling one inevitably gets to the question of waste and I would postulate actually that waste and enjoyment are in a sense coupled. There's a certain kind of pleasure principle that comes out of preoccupation with waste. Like if we want a bigger and better car we are going to have bigger and better waster productions. So there's a kind of equation there between the enjoyment of life and waste. Probably the opposite of waste is luxury.[184]

Figure 32 Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger *The Water Hole* 2008

While the detritus of excess feels far from luxurious, Sterner and Lenzlinger offered a respite from the confrontation of the waterhole with three beds in a clinical white space (figure 32). Over the first bed, a thirty-three-kilogram meteorite suspended directly above the viewer's head gave cause for some anxiety as to the strength of the support netting. Above the second, a mobile constructed from both natural and synthetic detritus, including plastic bags and dead branches, natural and artificial elements, teetered in a precarious, metaphorical balance, activated by the viewer getting on to the bed. The third bed was suspended, its swaying motion putting the viewer in similar motion to the mobile, which I found mildly disorienting. In his review

[184] Robert Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 303.

of the work, Robert Nelson described it as leaving him "wobblier and weaker".[185] Nevertheless, of all the rooms of the installation, I found this one to be the most successful; these distilled experiences were more amenable to contemplation than the more spectacular and hallucinatory spaces.

The final, quiet encounter was a quasi-scientific desalination plant for tears (figure 33) of which the artists commented in the catalogue "in the end, no worries, we can still drink our tears!"[186] A planned desalination plant was a cause for contention between the government and environmental groups at the time of the artist residency. It was subsequently built and on completion in 2012, immediately went in to standby mode, the drought broken and dam levels in Victoria back at an acceptable level.[187]

In order to comply with copyright the image has been removed.

Figure 33 Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger *The Water Hole* (detail) 2008

[185] Robert Nelson, "Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger," *The Age*, 22 January 2009, viewed 1 May 2011, http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/arts-reviews/gerda-steiner-and-joerg-lenzlinger/2009/01/22/1232471461969.html.
[186] Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, "The Water Hole," 4.
[187] Simon Lauder, "Victorians Pay Dearly, But Not a Drop to Drink," *The World Today, ABC News,* accessed 12 September 2015, http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2012/s3656791.htm.

Weaving together utopian and dystopian ideas, with the familiar transformed to appear strange, the artists were able to create a sense of awe in both beauty and decay. However, some of the more salient observations made by the artists seemed to be overshadowed in the waterhole space by chaos, spectacle, and massive volumes of materials. Their exploration of urban water supply was more engaging where humour, wonder, and poetic staging were evident, for example, the contemplative space and the desalination plant for tears. Compared to Pfaff's more artfully constructed chaos, I concur with Lehmann's contention that Steiner and Lenzlinger's work can seem "thrown together".[188] Unrestrained characteristics in artworks are useful to infer growing plants, mounting rubbish, and teeming cities—but there is a fine line between controlled chaos and confusion. This is something I am conscious of in my work and have refined through documentation and reflection of each work in the studio, followed by trial installations where possible in the gallery space.

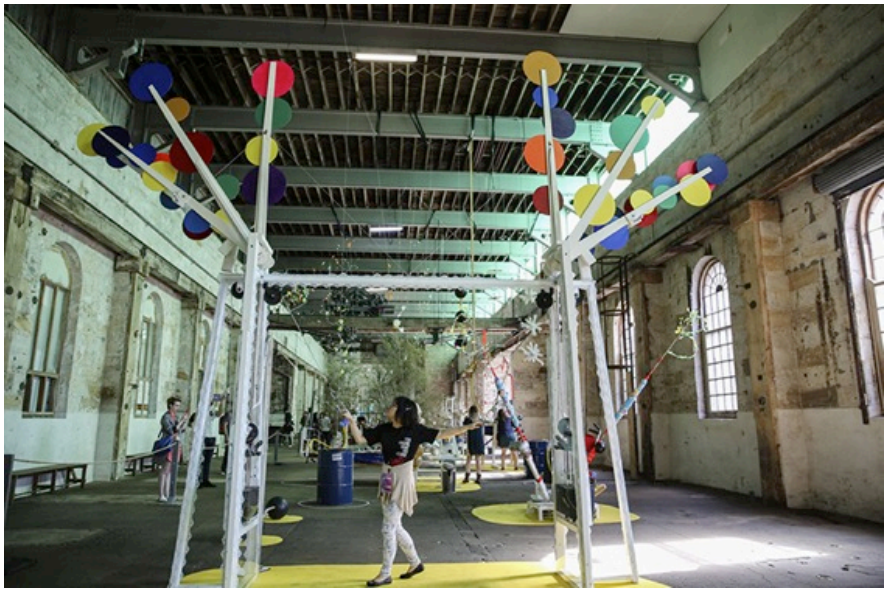

Figure 34 Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger *Bush Power* 2014

More recently, Steiner and Lenzlinger participated in the 19th Biennale of Sydney with their installation *Bush Power* (2014, figures 34 and 35). Less conceptually complex than *The Waterhole*, the work appeared overly reliant on spectacle and audience participation. Repurposing gymnasium equipment sourced on eBay in a series of artworks, the artists drew on Cockatoo Island's history of power generation and ship

[188] Lehmann, "Adams Brings Whimsy to Life: Childhood Fantasies Become Monstrosities."

building requiring human labour.[189] The kinetic works constructed from modified weight machines exaggerated the effects of physical exertion by the viewer/participant. Through the addition of colourful extensions to the apparatus, human energy is rendered visible as an exaggerated range of motion—bringing the machines to life. However, this is where the transaction between artwork and viewer ends. Because the machine became lifeless once the interaction ceased, for me, it held the same limited appeal as actually being in a gymnasium—moving from one machine to the next, going through a range of motions.

Figure 35 Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger *Bush Power* (detail) 2014

Whereas Steiner and Lenzlinger's critique of humans' behaviour can seem detached—their own place in society removed to that of observer—Australian artist Patricia Piccinini's practice seems framed by a more personal understanding of humanity's strengths and weaknesses. Her work also evidences a willingness to embrace dilemmas without the solace of solutions. I discuss her work in the following section.

[189] Juliana Engberg, ed., "Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger," in *You Imagine What You Desire: 19th Biennale of Sydney,* ex. cat., (Sydney, NSW: Biennale of Sydney Ltd, 2014), 248.

Patricia Piccinini: Ethical Dilemmas

At the end of the twentieth century, Australian artist Piccinini made an installation *Plasticology* (1997–2000, figure 36) that envisaged a dystopian future. A virtual, computer-generated forest displayed over fifty-seven monitors created an alienating and disconnected environment. While the virtual trees appear lush and perfect, their dense verdant foliage is animated to lash furiously in high winds, creating an anxious atmosphere. In his essay "What Is Installation?", Peter Hennessy states that Piccinini began *Plasticology* with the question "what is my 'natural' habitat? What is the natural environment of the contemporary person?"[190] These questions resounded strongly with me, as they are the sorts of questions that I constantly ponder while researching the botany encountered in the urban environment.

Figure 36 Patricia Piccinini *Plasticology* 1997–2000

Piccinini's work focuses on the relationship between humans and other living beings, and raises questions of ethics and care. By avoiding moralistic dualisms and embracing the ambivalence with which her creatures may be met, the artist invites contemplation and discussion rather than arousing fear or promoting science as a cure-all. Her artworks seem at once of this world and alien, their everyday familiarity

[190] Peter Hennessy, "Patricia Piccinini: Early Installations" (originally published as: "What Is Installation?"), *Patricia Piccinini* (website), accessed 20 September 2015, http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/9/286/38.

estranged through the artist's transformative approach. Viewpoints other than human are revealed to give agency to her *unheimlich* creatures and objects.

Piccinini has created vehicle-derived sculptures to address contemporary debates of consumerism and desire. By using automotive finishes, the artist makes her surfaces sleek, colourful and strangely desirable. In works such as *The Stags* (2009, figure 37) and *Nest* (2006, figure 38), the anthropomorphised machines appear to display emotions of aggression and love, respectively. The works alludes to the machines' reproductive capabilities without human-operated production lines. While the automotive industry conjures images of large-scale robotic machinery, Piccinini's work disturbs this scale, alluding to intimacy between machines—the stare-down between two aggressors competing for a female Vespa (*The Stags*), or the baby Vespa holding the adoring gaze of its mother (*Nest*).

Figure 37 Patricia Piccinini *The Stags* 2009

Figure 38 Patricia Piccinini *Nest* 2006

In her essay on another of her automotive works with anthropomorphic overtones, *Truck Babies* (figure 39), the artist explains her intention with the work,

> to take something as frightening and unfriendly as a truck and turn it into something that is cute, desirable and seductive. In the same way, consumer culture creates the beauty and desire that blinds you to the pollution and other problems of the industry and economics that lie behind it.[191]

The artist acknowledges that her own feelings towards the seduction of beauty as a ploy in consumer marketing are ambiguous, wanting her work to question the "nature" of contemporary society; as she states, "the increasingly strange and confused relationship between what we see as 'natural' and 'artificial' . . . The work also talks about the seductive nature of consumer culture, attempting to find a position that is both positive and critical."[192]

[191] Patricia Piccinini, "Truck Babies," *Patricia Piccinini*, accessed 8 April 2015, http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/printessay.php?id=11.
[192] Ibid.

Figure 39 Patricia Piccinini *Truck Babies* 1999

This statement resonates with specific concepts I have explored through my studio work. I use brightly coloured plastic bin-liner bags and flagging tape as materials to construct works that infer organic forms and growth. Suggesting the potential for the inert materials to run wild is something Piccinini also exploits, though in her case it is the potential wildness of technology. *The Stags* have the features of deer rather than sheep, and imply a technological realm no longer under human control.[193] For Piccinini, the motivation is to explore notions of technology's vibrancy and potential for physical and emotional autonomy. However, in my practice, I am motivated to acknowledge a vibrancy that already exists in the materials in our environment.

Piccinini also acknowledges the liveliness of matter in *Radial* (2005, figures 40 and 41) where the mutation on the tyre presents the object with the organic potential to change, mutate, and grow. By endowing the work with this evidence of agency, the artist challenges our all-knowing superiority and shows an alien potential in the mundane tyre. *Radial* draws attention to materiality through taking the factory-made object and imbuing it with an organic uniqueness, inviting the viewer to slow down and consider the object more carefully. The tyre's pristine tread indicates it has not

[193] Patricia Piccinini, "The Lovers," *Patricia Piccinini*, accessed 8 April 2015, http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/40/323/29.

nor will ever be used, the organic mound oozing from its top surface, rendering it unusable for its original purpose.

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Figure 40 Patricia Piccinini *Radial* 2005

It is not surprising that Haraway embraces Piccinini as a "sister in technoculture", saying,

> A co-worker committed to taking 'naturecultures' seriously without the soporific seductions of a return to Eden or the palpitating frisson of a jeremiad warning of the coming technological Apocalypse. . . . Piccinini's worlds require curiosity, emotional engagement and investigation; and they do not yield to clean judgments or bottom lines—especially not about what is living or non-living, organic or technological, promising or threatening.[194]

[194] Donna Haraway, "Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations: Taking Care of Unexpected Country," in *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 50 (2011): 95, accessed 8 April 2015, http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Australian+Humanities+Review+-+Issue+50,+2011/5451/ch06.xhtml.

In order to comply with copyright the image has been removed.

Figure 41 Patricia Piccinini *Radial* (detail)
2005

While Haraway sees Piccinini "as a compelling storyteller in the radical experimental lineage of feminist science fiction",[195] Whatmore's insistence on the hybridity of geographies is a similar quest, battled in the concrete world of the present when she argues for:

> An upheaval in the binary terms in which the question of nature has been posed and a re-cognition of the intimate, sensible and hectic bonds through which people and plants; devices and creatures; documents and elements take and hold their shape in relation to each other in the fabrications of everyday life.[196]

Hennessy notes that Piccinini "is less interested in debunking the idea of nature than she is in exploring what it might mean within a contemporary context".[197] Here, Jacqueline Millner draws a connection between Piccinini's work and the theories posited by Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*, when she suggests,

> not only are objects alive because of their capacities to shape the interrelationships of which they are a part, but humans are not autonomous; rather, they comprise a complex web of active bodies and materials. If we rethink the human/object dichotomy in this way, it leads us to accept that 'any action is always a transaction, and any act is really but an initiative that gives birth to a cascade of legitimate and bastard progeny'.[198]

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[195] Ibid., 95.
[196] Whatmore, "Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces," 3.
[197] Hennessy, "Patricia Piccinini: Early Installations."
[198] Bennett cited in Jacqueline Millner, "Mysterious Matter," in *ARTAND* 52, no.1 (Summer 2014): 138.

Thus Piccinini, like Haraway, Whatmore, and Bennett, focuses on contemporary entanglements rather than a neat blend of two clearly defined categories of nature and culture. Similarly, my research and studio work has been driven by a desire to arouse curiosity, engagement, and investigation through revealing entanglements between seemingly mundane living and non-living entities in my urban ecosystem.

Figure 42 Patricia Piccinini *Metaflora (Twin Rivers Mouth)* 2015

With the assistance of artisan collaborators, Piccinini births her "bastard progeny" in extremely realistic detail (figure 42).[199] Her inference to humanity's role in her hybrid creatures is through ideas relating to scientific practices of genetic engineering and cloning. In my work, the human hand is evident in the construction of hybrids with no attempt to be lifelike or seamless, which I detail in Chapter 4. Whereas Piccinini's offspring are born of the laboratory, mine issue from the domestic realm. Whereas Piccinini ponders the implications of frontier scientific and technological discoveries, my practice is a reflection on the potential for personal revelations with a focus on botany.

[199] Bennett cited in Jacqueline Millner, "Mysterious Matter," 138.

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Figure 43 Patricia Piccinini *Meditations on the Continuum of Vitality (Garden)* 2014

In recent works, Piccinini has taken her ongoing themes and entered the botanical realm of the garden (figure 42–3) where works such as *Metaflora* (figure 42) defy categorisations of plant or animal. I share an interest in species' categorisations though rather than focussing on scientific distinctions, my interest lies legislative classifications of plants as weeds depending on geographical location, and my research was informed and supported through the interrogation of artworks by Simon Starling.

Simon Starling: Lively Plants and Materials

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Figure 44 Simon Starling *Plant Room* 2008

British artist Simon Starling explores ecological concerns through his art practice as part of a larger investigation. For *Plant Room* (2008, figure 44), the artist created a mud-brick structure inside the Kunstraum Dornbirn—an environment within an environment—to display a selection of botanical photographs by renowned photographer Karl Blossfeldt. His mud-brick plant room was climate-controlled (whereas the larger Kunstraum space was not), which was essential to maintain the archival integrity of the delicate photographic works. Starling refers to the material liveliness of both the photographs and the materials used to construct the *Plant Room*, and how one impacts on the other, when he says,

> it was more an incubator, a perfect nurturing climate for fragile photographic prints. I very much liked the idea of using mud (for the structure) and water (for the fuel cell driven cooling system) to keep these plant images alive, so to speak. The building controlled the light levels, the humidity, and the temperature—creating as near perfect museum conditions as possible.[200]

The correlation that Starling draws between the materials of the structure and the materials associated with a plant's survival (earth and water) speaks of the vitality of both the images and the mud structure. The fragility of the photographic image necessitates a very particular environment to ensure that its archival integrity is not

[200] Simon Starling and Christiane Rekade, "Clever Objects–Tell-Tale Objects," *Art History* 36, no. 3 (2013): 640–51. doi: 10.1111/1467-8365.12021.

compromised. By using a mud hut, Starling acknowledges the potential for heat and humidity to damage the photographic material while simultaneously counteracting this with the mud hut's ability to protect the fragile plant images.

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Figure 45 Simon Starling *Plant Room* (interior view) 2008

Discussing the materiality of the art object, Arjun Appadurai says,

> despite their aspiration to the illusion of permanence, they [art objects] are only momentarily aggregations of material such as paint, bricks, glass, acrylic, cloth, steel and canvas. These underlying materials are ever volatile, which is why museums always insist that we "do not touch". What is at risk is not just aura or authenticity, but the fragility of objecthood itself.[201]

Appadurai's identification of the art object as volatile when observed in terms of its underlying materials speaks to Bennett's thoughts on material vibrancy. In the gallery, every effort is taken to ensure that this material volatility is controlled through maintaining appropriate light, humidity, and temperature conditions. Outside the gallery, this care and attention to the volatility of stuff (particularly garbage with no dollar value) has less of a priority. My interest in Starling's *Plant Room* is the way in

[201] Arjun Appadurai, "The Thing Itself," *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 15–22, accessed 2 June 2015, doi: 10.1215/08992363-18-1-15.

which he links the idea of organic materials—earth and water—to supporting the 'life' of the photographic images of plant. The mud-brick structure has agency. This building within the gallery building houses the work and, due to its material make-up, is able to create conditions that sustain the work inside—just as greenhouses, or 'plant rooms', provide a nurturing environment for delicate plants. The Kunstraum becomes the outside, with its unregulated climate and varied light conditions.

Starling's artwork *Rescued Rhododendrons* (1999, figure 46) highlights a different type of vitality in the territorial disputes we sometimes have with botany, when plants that are introduced to an environment escape human control and become a threat to existing native species. Shown as a video installation, *Rescued Rhododendrons* documents Starling's rescue of a carload of *Rhododendron ponticum* plants from Scotland and their return to their native land. Botanists believe that, after its introduction from Spain in 1763, the plant hybridised with a more cold-tolerant North American variety, allowing it to survive and thrive in cooler conditions.[202] Scotland has a Rhododendron Society for avid collectors and breeders of this colourful flowering plant. Unfortunately, the plant's popularity means it is now a serious threat to biodiversity in Scottish woodlands and heathlands, requiring major initiatives to control its spread. Brady cites the cultivation of this variety in the United Kingdom as an example of where humans indirectly harm something (the environment) to achieve an aesthetic goal, which raises the issue of ethics in environmental aesthetics.[203]

Starling became aware of the intended destruction of a particular area of filled with *Rhododendron ponticum* plants through an announcement for a Scottish landscape sculpture project.[204] He then set about returning plants to their homeland in a red Volvo 240 Estate, documenting the journey. Despite the presence of key subject matter—environmental endangerment, compromised biodiversity and invasive species—Starling's small historical reversal does not have the political fervour of extreme environmental activism. Nevertheless, it does raise awareness of the plant as

[202] Scottish Natural Heritage, "Rhododendron Ponticum and Hybrids," accessed 6 February 2013, http://www.snh.gov.uk/land-and-sea/managing-the-land/forestry-and-woodlands/looked-after/rhododendron/.
[203] Emily Brady, "Aesthetics, Ethics and the Natural Environment," in *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics,* ed. Arnold Berleant (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 114.
[204] Secession, "Simon Starling May 4–June 24, 2001," accessed 2 December 2015, http://www.secession.at/art/2001_starling_e.html.

an environmental issue. The witty treatment of the subject matter is engaging and memorable rather than didactic. In a curious twist, Starling's *Rhododendron's* homecoming was not permanent. Artist Roisyn Byrne located the *Rhododendrons* through correspondence with Starling via his gallery. In an act of environmental vandalism or parasitic practice, she went to Spain, located the plants, dug some up and smuggled them back to the United Kingdom. Pollan would probably give at least part of the credit to the plant's seductive powers of beauty.[205]

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Figure 46 Simon Starling *Rescued Rhododendrons 5* 1999

Nevertheless, Starling's fascination with the *Rhododendron* was far from over. He revisited the plant in *Island for Weeds* (2003, figure 47)—an "ad-hoc extraterritorial space for the plant to grow freely".[206] Echoing Robert Smithson's propositional *Floating Island to Travel around Manhattan Island* (1970, figure 48), Starling's heterotopic non-place is a clever approach to overcome limitations of jurisdiction.

[205] Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, xvii.
[206] Francesco Manacorda and Ariella Yedgar, eds., "Simon Starling," in *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009* (London: Koenig Books Ltd, 2009), 216.

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Figure 47 Simon Starling *Island for Weeds* 2003

In order to comply with copyright the image has been removed.

Figure 48 Robert Smithson *Floating Island to Travel around Manhattan Island* 1970

Starling's interest in *Rhododendrons* connects to my interest in the *Sansevieria trifasciata*, classified as a class R weed by the Brisbane City Council, which advises that it is "a moderate threat and eradication is not a viable option . . . look out for infestations and plan for their removal during routine maintenance.[207] As I argue in Chapter 4, the *Sansevieria*'s highly visible migration from indoors to outdoors to a nature reserve in my local area has been a useful exemplar to explore multiple—and, sometimes, conflicting—concepts in my work.

Through my examination of the contemporary artworks discussed in this chapter, I have been able to situate my art practice within a canon of contemporary artists critiquing specific aspects of human/nature relationships. The visual analysis of specific artworks has identified both the positive strategies and less successful tactics employed by the artists. Scrutinising their methodologies has both validated aspects of my practice and motivated me to investigate more effective approaches to articulate my ideas. In the next chapter, I will discuss the creative output of my research, the culmination of my speculative theoretical and visual research, and my studio investigations.

[207] Brisbane City Council, "Weed Classification," *Brisbane City Council Weed Identification Tool,* accessed 17 March 2015, http://weeds.brisbane.qld.gov.au/weed-classification.

Chapter 3: Indoors and Outdoors, Materials, and Methods

Introduction

Diverse encounters with urban botanical environments in Brisbane, London, Melbourne, New York, Paris, Philadelphia, Rome, Singapore, Sydney, and Venice, and the evidence and experiences acquired from these sites informed the studio research of this enquiry. For the artworks produced during the research, I have re-situated botany from the outdoors by bringing plants into both the studio and gallery spaces. Through my studio investigation, I have asserted the abandonment of the concept of a distanced nature or wilderness by creating intimate, personal encounters with botany. By focusing on specific plants and the sometimes contradictory environmental dilemmas posed and benefits provided, the effects of consumer culture, as well as the urban entanglement of living and non-living entities, the artworks attempt to challenge assumptions of the natural environment as something external, wild and pure, unsullied by the presence of humans. Key to the studio enquiry was my pursuit of evidence of the vitality of things other than humans, both living and non-living. The studio environment has been a laboratory for experimenting with ways of permeating the visible and invisible divisions of environments, and the series of metaphorical and legislated territorial bubbles that separate home from garden from city from urban fringe from farmland from wilderness.

My ongoing engagement with how humans cohabitate with botany in cities has been central to my speculative creative research. The interstices of built and botanical environments where humans' presence and influence is clearly evident has captivated my interest, rather than more unmediated natural environments where that same presence is considered as an intrusive or detrimental force. While we may desire to spend time in pristine wildernesses, Hawkins succinctly reminds us that the evidence of our own kind's presence in such places sullies our paradise fantasies, as noted in Chapter 1.[208] I argue that focussing on human interaction with urban botany, and developing an aesthetic appreciation for these hybrid environments, enables new ways of visualising the reciprocity and interdependence of this relationship.

[208] Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, vii.

The ideas that compel and influence my visual art practice reside in the intersections and overlaps of nature and artifice, organic and synthetic, living and non-living. At the sites of my research—the city and suburbs—botany is framed, contained, isolated, and sometimes completely disconnected from the ground, growing on balconies, roof-tops, and clinging to walls. Despite the amount of human endeavour directed towards controlling urban flora in interstitial spaces, plants assert their agency, growing against and between hard and sealed surfaces of concrete and bitumen. Whether intentionally planted or introduced by urban wildlife, wind, or water, opportunistic plants find the cracks and ruptures of sealed cities. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sonfist's *Time Landscape* demonstrates the activity of other urban inhabitants, such as birds and squirrels, that influence the species presence on a piece of ground.

Figure 49 Detail of Julie-Anne Milinski's of studio at Queensland College of Art 2015

This chapter outlines the creative methodologies I have employed to explore and extend this research that centres on the key themes of the urban environment, botany, consumer culture, and urban waste. They encompass the methodologies of walking, photographing, collecting, crocheting, and botanical drawing.

Walking

As noted in Chapter 1, walking has played a crucial role in my experience and examination of urban botany. I have appreciated wide environmental variances as I meander between my studio, and across the Brisbane River, through to the city Botanical Gardens, and into the Brisbane CBD. In doing so, I transgress between parkland, residential, and commercial zones. In "Walking the City", David Macauley describes urban walking as being "a transformative practice because the moving body and the plurality of places it inhabits are constantly conjoined and then decoupled in new ways that come to reveal the metropolitan world in its manifold dimensions".[209] He asserts that,

> urban strolls are generally the most basic and direct mode of apprehending our surroundings, of attuning ourselves to the aesthetic environment. In this sense, they both orient the lived body while ceaselessly dislocating and relocating us within new boundaries, regions and territories.[210]

In the range of cities visited during my candidature, I have used walking to orient myself and experience these locations through the transformative practice described by Macaulay. In these cities, walking was my most utilised method of transport (apart from using public transport where absolutely necessary due to long distances or extreme weather). The minutiae experienced during this perambulatory research provoked insights into contemporary urban botanical environments, and having the time for these speculations to unfold within the very places that provoked them was key. The visual stimulation of these varied locations has broadened my aesthetic appreciation of various approaches to the inclusion of botany, sometimes in unlikely places (figure 50). Important was the way these spaces enhanced pedestrians' experiences of place. Macauley eloquently describes how the physical experience of urban walking affects the consciousness, saying,

> In the urban walk, there is a continuous stream of 'information' parading past and through us, most of it more culturally encoded than in the countryside or wilderness. Like the catalysts and cues provided by a smell that takes us to remembrances of places past, walking loosens, unties, and releases the mnemonic knots in the body, triggering an active engagement with an archival recollection of the places through which we walk.[211]

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[209] David Macauley, "Walking the City," in *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, 100.
[210] Ibid., 101.
[211] Macauley, "Walking the City," 115.

Figure 50 Paris bus shelter with rooftop garden 2012

My experience of urban walking varied greatly due to the fact that some older cities are more easily navigated on foot, while others have been designed for automotive travel.[212] Macauley notes the allure of older European cities that were built in an era where scale was determined by "a walker's sense of aesthetic appreciation, bodily needs, and a desire for public participation".[213] Increasing urban density and the need of transportation options for inner-city residents has prompted urban development to consider pedestrians, providing the impetus for projects like the *Goods Line* in Sydney, designed to encourage pedestrian traffic. The inclusion of botany in these developments is significant in increasing natural environments in cities, with Macauley seeing "trees for shade and overhead cover . . . and flower beds for aesthetic pleasure" as provisions required to stimulate pedestrian activity within a city.[214]

[212] Los Angeles is a prime example of the latter, described by Peter Hall as "a laboratory for the late twentieth century urban future . . . for attempts by planners and architects to accommodate the car". See Peter Hall, "The City on the Highway," in *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design Since 1880* (Chichester, West Sussex : Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 334.
[213] Macauley, "Walking the City," 114–15.
[214] Ibid., 114.

Figure 51 Flower Dome, Gardens by the Bay Singapore 2013

Walking is a key support in my methodology of collecting photographic documentation. As well as visual discoveries, pedestrian exploration has also prompted me to observe and experience the climate of these places. I have memories of long walks in Singapore where the temperature was frequently over 30°C, and I appreciated large shady trees and the cooling sea breeze I experienced on the perimeter of the island. A curious experience in a climate-controlled flower dome at Gardens by the Bay (figure 51) became even more surreal after walking through the humid, outdoor garden admiring a myriad of exotic tropical plants. Moving into to the enormous glass enclosure, I was impressed by the vast plant collection, which included a thousand-year-old olive tree that was so unlike the plants that could survive outside. As dazzling as the display of glass-house plants appeared, I spent much of my time looking out at the palm trees blowing in the wind. Strangely, I was reminded of Piccinini's *Plasticology* (figure 36), discussed in the previous chapter. I marvelled that I was in a reverse of the simulated reality she created on a television screen. In that moment, my environment was a glass bubble of unreality with botany that had been transported from all over the world to reside inside a cool, dry habitat, while outside, the reality was a hot, humid city.

Collecting

Collecting has been a key methodology I have employed in the studio research, and three distinct collections have emerged during the project. The first is that of photographs I have taken while walking in urban environments, which generated ideas and operated as catalysts and inspirations for studio outcomes. These images exist physically on the walls of my studio, and on the noticeboard next to my computer, and digitally on hard disks and in the 'Cloud'. I have drawn upon this collection to inform individual artworks as well as the arrangement of multiple works, as will be detailed in Chapter 4.

The second collection focuses on consumer-packaging materials, important in relation to studio experimentation and, in some cases, the final artworks. The act of amassing containers from food and cleaning products has been simultaneously enlightening and concerning. Two large cupboards full of plastic, glass, and cardboard have filled to overflowing numerous times during the project. It has made me acutely aware of the enormous volume of material that passes through my household despite our best efforts to buy products with minimal packaging. When I disrupted the pattern of consuming, disposing and recycling, I was confronted by the sheer physical presence of plastic containers, glass jars and bottles accumulating in my studio and garage. While I had the comfort of knowing that I could dispose of the packaging at any time in the normal recycling collection (even if it was over the course of a couple of months), arresting this flow from household to rubbish tip was a disturbing exercise, the volume of 'stuff' overwhelming. In 1969, Victor Burgin noticed artists responding to waste materials, saying,

> Each day we are faced with the intractability of materials which have outstayed their welcome. Many recent attitudes to materials in art are based in an emerging awareness of the interdependence of all substances within the ecosystem of earth. The artist is liable to see himself not as creator of new material forms but rather as a coordinator of existing forms, and may therefore choose to subtract forms from the environment. As art is being seen increasingly in terms of behaviour, so materials are being seen in terms simply of quantity rather than quality.[215]

[215] Victor Burgin, "Situational Aesthetics," in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Maldon, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 895.

Burgin's recognition of an emergence of artistic attention directed towards ecosystems and the interdependence of the materials within them speaks directly to my research's key themes. However, while the collecting process has informed my ideas and concerns with material quantities, it the studio experimentation which has revealed material qualities, with my manual attempts at material transformation being an essential aspect of the discovery and research.

The third collection of the research comprises botanical specimens. There has been a constant stream of botany through my studio, and my research took on a propagating tangent, with many of the plants growing from cuttings gifted to me by fellow postgraduate candidates. The care required with this collection (watering, rotating for sunlight, fertilising) has been a rewarding endeavour as plants flourished and provided drawing subjects and materials for works. The project has also had an impact on my home environment as plants that did not thrive in the studio made their way into a once barren garden. Growing plants from cuttings, particularly in the case of a *Sansevieria* where just a small section of leaf is enough to grow a new plant, or succulents that can be grown from a single leaf, has been a constant reinforcement of the agency of the plant, confirming that I was not the only one 'at work' in my studio. Watching these and other virulent plants become the most prevalent botany in the studio also reminded me of why these species are an environmental issue in terms of habitat domination.

Crocheting

Crocheting was introduced in the studio research as a way of transforming the materials I was frequently encountering alongside botany in the urban environment. As Brisbane building developments increase both the size and density of the city, the fluorescent colours of nylon builders line and flagging tape are ubiquitous among the seemingly endless number of construction sites. These materials are also prevalent in parklands and public gardens undergoing some form of human intervention or alteration. Most of the construction, landscaping, and road works industries that use these materials are still male-dominated. These materials tend to be stretched into straight lines to mark out borders and barriers on areas of land. They are also used to

signify potential hazards, such as fallen tree branches. Used for their intended purposes, flagging tape and builders line create quick, temporary guidelines, passing quickly through the hands of workers. These materials are rapidly manufactured and subsequently rapidly consumed; their temporary presence in the environment is short-lived before becoming waste material.

By contrast, crocheting is a technique that involves time and extensive manual handling. I decided to use crochet as a studio methodology to contrast with the non-traditional materials I have chosen to crochet with, which are all machine-made, mass-produced, and synthetic. Crocheting slows down this rapid consumption. I hold these materials for hours as they pass over my crochet hook and between my fingertips. Rather than the quickly dashed out straight lines, crochet involves creating a chain, stitch by stitch, then repeating this gesture to form thousands of interconnecting loops to create a woven fabric. The scented plastic bin-liner bags, plastic flagging tape, and nylon builders line used for my artworks are manufactured in a process where quality control ensures that one plastic bag is the same as the next, one roll of tape the same as the next. Unlike wool and other natural fibres, where it is important to match dye-lots when making a garment to ensure colour continuity, in the world of industrial plastics, green is green. However, the human process of crochet is idiosyncratic as tension varies, with no two loops identical. Crochet acts subversively on the mundane materials used and, in the process, transforms uniform, temporal plastics used in linear, rapid, one-off gestures into irregular, slow, solid, fleshy, weighty, networks and arrangements that hold the investment of my time and touch in their net of loops and knots.

The associated inferences of traditional crafts such as women's work, and the romantic notion of the matrilineal passing down of skills were frequently raised by viewers wanting to trace a familial lineage of craft tradition. Both my grandmother and my mother worked outside the home in paid employment, and their limited time at home was consumed by running the household. Most of my crochet instruction has come from the twenty-first-century upholders of craft traditions and techniques: the craftspeople who post instructional videos on YouTube. My left-handedness has not been an issue, with an array of left-handed crochet demonstration videos available. The only patterns used have been templates taken directly from plant leaves such as

the *Monstera deliciosa*, which has created a relationship between the organic and crocheted leaves (figure 52).

Figure 52 Julie-Anne Milinski *Monstera deliciosa* leaf crocheted from flagging tape 2014

Traditionally, crochet would involve the use of a natural fibre such as wool or cotton, or perhaps even a more luxurious fibre, such as silk or cashmere. Whatever the yarn used, the process involves touch, predominantly with the fingertips. When using a natural fibre or even acrylic yarn, there is a sensuality to the feel of the fibre against the skin. Natural fibres have minor yet unique variations in each skein of yarn or ball of wool. This is not the case with plastics and nylon, which have a monotonous consistency. Some lightweight plastics feel slippery and can be difficult to manipulate. Heavier plastics can grab and require extreme pressure to hook through the crocheted stitches. The scented plastic bags I used to construct *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* (a work discussed in the following chapter) have a slight powdery surface, which caused the skin on my hands to dry out. There is also difference in smell between natural fibres and plastic bags. Wool and cotton have a natural smell, which, when coloured with natural vegetable dyes,

can be relatively pleasant. In contrast, plastics often emit an unpleasant chemical odour, and while the selection of scents in the plastic bags I used were botanically inspired (apple, orange, lime, and rose), the synthetic perfumes became unpleasant when crocheting with this material for extended periods of time. These sensations experienced through touch and smell seemed to linger with the length of contact time of the materials.

The experience of the materiality of the plastic bags was revealed through my prolonged manual cutting of long strips. In a similar scenario, Hawkins describes a frantic Monday morning where a child needs a plastic bag to store a wet bathing suit in a schoolbag. Her description of the frustration of trying to coerce the bag to open conveys its clingy materiality and suggests that it is not just the usefulness of the plastic bag as a waterproof container that is present in this situation. She draws on John Law's term "in-here enactment", described as the "processes whereby material presence is enacted into being in distinct relations and practices".[216] Upsetting "oppositions between environmentally aware subject and hated object", the useful plastic bag in this domestic scenario presents its "material presence" and in doing so disturbs assumptions of its negative connotations.[217] Hawkins explains,

> Its mundane practicality challenges the circuits of guilt and conscience that drive command moralities: say no to plastic bags! Instead, the in-here enactment of the bag reveals a different plastic materiality that rearranges conduct and perceptions. Our response to the invitation from the bag to be patient disturbs arrogant senses of human agency and mastery. This inanimate thing is animate: it is suggesting particular actions.[218]

Through the extensive manipulation of crochet, I came to know these plastics in a new way; the strength of these temporal materials that at first had appeared to be flimsy became apparent. No longer simply a temporarily useful then troublesome object, the plastic bags' material potential beyond its inert state was a revelation to me, discovered through the hand (figure 53).

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[216] Gay Hawkins, "Plastic Materialities," in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, ed. Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 127.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.

Figure 53 Scented plastic bin liners cut and crocheted 2013

Botanical Drawing

In 2013, I undertook botanical drawing classes through a sixteen-week course at the Mt Coot-tha Botanical Gardens run by the Botanical Artists' Society of Queensland. The course covered techniques in pencil drawing, shading, and watercolour. The prolonged observation required for these classes using a magnifying glass and a ruler to ensure accuracy differed from all previous drawing instruction I had received at art school. The overall approach was largely scientific rather than creative. In fact, the only creative aspect encouraged was how to best portray the specimen's features through composition. I felt that this new way of seeing and treating a subject matter would benefit my studio practice; by making botany the focus of my attention, the course would assist me in understanding the structure of plants. Not only did it fulfil these expectations, but it also provided visual provocations to the speculative theoretical research I was undertaking.

Botanical Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) is a global organisation whose goal is to ensure the worldwide conservation of threatened plants to maintain diversity. It explains that the primary aim of botanical illustration is scientific accuracy rather than art, where an illustration is required to "portray a plant with the precision

and level of detail for it to be recognized and distinguished from another species".[219] Therefore, the BGCI promote the contemporary relevance of botanical illustration, stating,

> Although photography may help inform botanical work, botanical illustration can represent clearly what may not easily be seen in a photograph. Outline drawings distinguish elements that cannot easily be made out using reflected light alone. Also, the composition of the image can be manipulated more fully in illustration, and features displayed together which may not easily be shown simultaneously in nature.[220]

Importantly, botanical illustration is used to present "the ideal version or representative of [a] species", something not always available to photograph but able to be constructed from multiple specimens.[221]

Botanical illustration is extremely time-consuming and requires intense concentration and complete immersion in the subject. It is common practice to complete a line drawing, take a tracing, do a new drawing with shading; and then use the tracing again to make an outline for a painting. Most traditional botanical illustration depicts perfection in a subject; however, watching the deterioration of a specimen can reveal a great deal about its structure. In the focused contemplation of plants through botanical drawing, one encounters both the mundane and the exotic. The simplest of leaves may make an excellent study, particularly when they have dried and curled. An exotic orchid may seduce the amateur drawer/painter only to provide endless frustration with their complex structure and hard to reproduce colours.

A search for a drawing subject while undertaking the classes reacquainted me with a forgotten *Phalaenopsis* that I had relegated to a back corner of the garden next to the compost bin once it had ceased to bloom (figure 54). At some point, it was stripped of its decorative container and replanted in a pot that once housed a Silver Break Fern (according to the Bunnings barcode label affixed to it). With its adhesive misrepresentations of classification and commercial value, this pot now contains a variety of plants, a strange grouping that has occurred through the spread of seeds

[219] Botanical Gardens Conservation International, "Resources: Botanical Illustration," accessed 12 May 2013. http://www.bgci.org/resources/botanical_illustration/.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Susanna Speier, "Why Botanical Illustration Still Matters in the Digital Age," Colorado Public Radio, 30 December 2013, accessed 12 June 2014. https://www.cpr.org/news/story/essay-why-botanical-illustration-still-matters-digital-age.

and spores in that particular microcosm of my garden. This orchid was to be the subject of a still life, but, with its potted collection of diverse flora, it became more a miniature landscape representative of a very specific corner of my Camp Hill backyard. I began to see the pot as significant and a container of a particular botanical environment representative of a larger natural environment; namely, the backyard. This realisation has had a direct impact in the studio research, as noted in Chapter 4 when I analyse the conceptual investigation of my artwork *Jardinière* (2014).

Figure 54 Snapshot of backyard biodiversity Camp Hill, orchid, fern and weeds 2013

In botanical illustration, it is common practice for a specimen to be drawn floating on the page, casting no shadow (figure 55). Devoid of habitat, the plant is isolated for scientific observation. A white card is often placed behind the subject to assist in the removal of background distractions, in the same way that white gallery walls focus the viewer's attention to the art being exhibited. Whereas in previous centuries, botanical illustrators accompanied expeditions to record newly discovered flora, more recently, contemporary botanical artists often choose to focus on endangered species. Botanical artist and activist Margaret Mee documented the flora of the Amazon, making fifteen trips to work from the live plants. During this period, she witnessed the

destruction and exploitation of the Amazonian rainforests and campaigned against the mining and deforestation practices there.[222]

Figure 55 Margaret Mee *Clusia grandiflora* 1987

A tactic that Mee employed in her later paintings was to reintroduce the background in her paintings of rare Brazilian plants in the hope that by including their habitat, the interdependency between plant and environment would be emphasised (figure 56).[223] Undoubtedly, Mee would be saddened to see the continuing degradation of the environment she cherished. Scientist Antonio Donato Nobre, the author of *The Future Climate of Amazonia Scientific Assessment Report*, compares the current climate crisis to the 2008 financial crisis, saying,

[222] Anita McConnell, "Mee, Margaret Ursula (1909–1988)," In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/60330.

[223] Shirley Sherwood, "The Renaissance of Contemporary Botanical Art," in *A New Flowering: 1000 Years of Botanical Art*, ed. Shirley Sherwood, Stephen Harris, and B. E. Juniper (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2005), 14.

> The climate crisis has the potential to be immeasurably worse than any financial crisis, nonetheless the ruling elite has been procrastinating for over fifteen years on making effective decisions to save humanity from climate disaster. Despite the abundance of scientific evidence and of viable, creative and appealing solutions, this procrastination seems to be worsening. . . . Zero deforestation, which was already a matter of urgency a decade ago, is still presented as a goal to be met some time in the distant future.[224]

Figure 56 Margaret Mee *Philodendron Rio Negro Amazonas* (undated)

Perhaps if those that Nobre describes as the ruling elite witnessed the unique plants first-hand as Mee had, they may have shared her enchantment and developed an appreciation of the assets of the forest less evident than the land it lies on.

In attending botanical drawing classes, I created a framework with which to engage with botanical specimens for several hours each week (figure 58). This level of intensity and concentration would not have occurred without a formal structure and,

[224]Antonio Donato Nobre, *The Future Climate of Amazonia, Scientific Assessment Report*, Sponsored by CCST-INPE, INPA and ARA (São José dos Campos, Brazil, 2014), 34-35. Accessed 3 October 2015, http://www.ccst.inpe.br/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Future_Climate_of_Amazonia_Report.pdf.

during those hours, my focus shifted from a macro to a micro perspective and from landscape to still life. In doing so, I saw that a potted plant could contain a miniature landscape, what Foucault called the "smallest parcel of the world . . . and the totality of the world".[225]

Figure 57 Julie-Anne Milinski *Untitled (subject Sansevieria trifasciata growing through sponge, recovered from under Jude's deck on the Brisbane River)* 2013

The focused study of plant structures resulted in my investigation of arboreal practices, such as coppicing[226] and pollarding [227] (figure 57), to be able to recognise a plant's distinct type of growth as a reaction to being cut back. This evidence of the agency of botany in response to human alterations is a visible marker of shared human–plant cohabitation that I frequently notice on city trees pruned to fit within their

[225] Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 26.

[226] Coppicing is the practice of a " small wood or thicket of deciduous trees . . . grown for the purpose of periodical rotational cutting (*coppicing*) down to a low stump (*coppice-stool*) to encourage the growth of long, thin uprights used for basket-making, fences, hurdles, thatching, etc.". See James Stevens Curl and Susan Wilson, "Coppice" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture,* 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Oxford Reference.

[227] Pollarding is "a system of management in which the main stem of a (usually young) tree is severed about 2m above ground level, favouring the development of lateral branches. Repeated pollarding leads to the formation of a slightly swollen boll in the main stem immediately below the lateral branches and frequent pollarding, common with willows (*Salix* species), produces many thin-stemmed lateral branches." See Michael Allaby, ed., "Pollarding," in *A Dictionary of Ecology,* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Oxford Reference.

urban confines. In the tracing and reproduction of drawings of specimens, I considered the aesthetic implications associated with the reduction of biodiversity. Like the white cardboard used to block out the visual distraction from behind a specimen, I deliberated on the effect of white gallery walls, and how the material presence of my work may have a different potency indoors.

Figure 57 Pollarded trees in Zeeland, Netherlands

These studio research methodologies of walking, photographing, collecting, crocheting, and botanical drawing created a framework through which I became more sensorially engaged with my environment. Through the measured pace of walking, I perceived my environment as a multi-sensory experience where the sounds and smells of the city and suburbs deepened my understanding of what I saw. Collecting consumer packaging raised my awareness of the cumulative potential of waste when not expediently removed from my environment. Collecting plants enhanced the same environment, visually and imperceptibly through air purification. Crochet and other manually repetitive tasks, such as cutting and bending plastic bags and containers—to use Law's term, "in-here enactments"[228]—raised my awareness of the durability and utility of these disposable materials. Botanical drawing increased my knowledge of plants' structures and growth.

[228] Hawkins, "Plastic Materialities," 127.

The creative research was guided by these methodologies, revealing the relationships between the living and non-living co-habitants in my urban habitats of home and studio. Through these practices, I have used botany as a leitmotif to explore issues of the larger natural environment, enriching notions of what constitutes a natural environment in contemporary urban society. The artworks that resulted from these methodologies focus on botany within the urban environment to reveal the reciprocity and interdependency of our relationship with plants and the vibrancy of the materials we introduce to the environment.

Chapter 4: Hothouse – The Environment of the Studio

Introduction

The studio I have worked in for the past four years at QCA, Griffith University, is located in Southbank on the banks of the Brisbane River. With parklands on one side and a major building development on the other, I find myself situated at the intersection of the built and the botanical. From the balcony of the studio building, there is a view across the river of the city skyline, populated with cranes on construction sites, where tall towers rise higher each year. The Botanical Gardens on the river's edge provide a languid respite from the built environment, with time seeming to slow in the shade of the Moreton Bay fig trees. From the studio, I have experienced the view of this tropical city, and the visual and conceptual borders of city and suburbs. The botany that resides in both locations has informed the work produced during my candidacy.

My studio research focuses on human interactions with urban botany and speculatively explores ways of visualising the reciprocity and interdependency of this relationship. Botany has been used metonymically to connect to a larger concept of nature. Through creative experimentation, the potency of materials associated with our contemporary consumer society has been established through their transformation in artworks. The creative works discussed in this chapter visually expand and enrich notions of what constitutes contemporary natural environments.

re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents, 2012

At the commencement of my PhD candidature in 2012, I exhibited *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents* (figures 61, 62, 64–65) at Metro Arts in the Brisbane CBD, as part of the Brisbane Emerging Arts Festival (BEAF).[229] Using the modus operandi of a gardener, I took 'cuttings' from a previous installation to create a new garden that was transplanted into the gallery environment. The previous installation had represented the culmination of my Honours research in 2011, where I argued that the increasing presence of the simulacra of nature in urban environments and the subsequent supplanting of reality in our imaginations affect our connection to the natural environment. My intention with *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents* was to introduce consumer-packaging materials into the constructed botanical environment. With a focus on plastic bottles due to their ubiquitous presence as litter in urban parks and gardens, I drew attention to the robust materiality of the objects through the way they were used in the work.

Earlier in 2012 I had travelled to Singapore, which proved crucial to the conceptual and visual breakthroughs in the work. Singapore's government is heavily invested in their commitment to urban botanical environments. At the time of my visit, the country's already impressive Botanical Gardens were in the process of being augmented with the construction of Gardens by the Bay (figure 59). As Singapore's Prime Minister states,

> Singapore has long recognised the importance of a green environment to our wellbeing, peace of mind and sense of belonging. Nature is an integral part of our urban landscape. Green spaces such as the Botanical Gardens, neighbourhood parks, nature reserves, and Active, Beautiful and Clean Waters are fully integrated into our environment. Gardens by the Bay is the latest expression of our vision to transform Singapore into a City in a Garden.[230]

This ambitious development presenting nature as spectacle includes the world's largest glass greenhouse, a cloud forest with the world's tallest indoor waterfall, and a grove of artificial "supertrees".[231]

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[229] This has been changed in recent years to Brisbane Experimental Art Festival.

[230] Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister Singapore, cited in Buck Song Koh, *Perpetual Spring: Singapore's Gardens by the Bay* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2012), 8.

[231] Gardens by the Bay, "Conservatory: Flower Dome," "Conservatory: Cloud Forest," and "Supertree Grove," accessed 29 December 2015, http://www.gardensbythebay.com.sg/en.html.

Figure 59 Gardens by the Bay construction site Singapore 2012

During my stay, I came to experience Singapore as a city within a garden, noting the commitment by both the government and the public to introduce plants to the environment at every opportunity. While I visited the Singapore Botanic Gardens and viewed the construction site of Gardens by the Bay, both spectacular examples of urban garden projects, some of my more memorable encounters with Singapore's urban botany were experienced during my walks through the streets of the city. I took photographs of local gardening practices, including the triangulated staking of trees (figure 60), the temporary arrangements of potted plants as traffic islands, and potted vegetable gardens outside retail stores, all of which demonstrated the importance of botany to the Singaporeans. From these seemingly mundane encounters, ideas germinated that were manifested in the work *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents*, and also in the studio research, in ways that I could not have envisaged prior to the trip.

When installing the work in the Metro Arts gallery space, I encountered several challenges due to the building's heritage status listing meant that any attachments to the walls and ceiling requiring perforation of the surface had to be minimised. These limitations necessitated alternative installation methods for works that were to be suspended. One of these strategies became a tripod structure from which plants were suspended (figure 61), an idea resulting directly from visual research undertaken in Singapore. In both Singapore and the gallery, the structure's purpose is to support botanical life.

Figure 60 Tree staking Singapore 2012

Figure 61 Julie-Anne Milinski *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents* (detail) 2012

Modelled on the *Brachychiton rupestris*, or Queensland Bottle Tree, a significant new work within the installation, *Brachychiton rupestris linoleumii* (figure 62), connected a distinctive indigenous tree with a distinctive form of consumer packaging, the plastic bottle. Specimens of the *Brachychiton rupestris* are located in the gardens at Southbank and Anzac Square in the Brisbane CBD. The artwork incorporates a readymade bottle dryer, which I had been using in my studio to dry the plastic bottles I was collecting and cleaning. Marcel Duchamp made this form iconic in his work *Bottle Dryer* (1914), however, whereas his was constructed from galvanised iron, the object I used is plastic. The base of the tree was fabricated from vinyl flooring material with a simulated wooden-floor board pattern. Bottle-shaped panels cut from the vinyl were sewn together with nylon builders line.

Figure 62 Julie-Anne Milinski *Brachychiton rupestris linoleumii* 2012

The BEAF attracts a large audience due to a number of live performances staged as part of the program. I was invited to collaborate with spoken-word poets Scott Sneddon and Rhyll Tonge, which resulted in them writing a work focussing on *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents,* that they performed in the gallery on the opening night (figure 63). Eleanor Jackson, curator of BEAF's spoken word program, described the collaboration, based on the tradition of *ekphrasis*, as offering "a chance to engage audiences around one piece, with a specific response to the work that gives the audience an opportunity to develop their vocabulary of

description/response/engagement with the visual art".[232] The collaboration provided the experience of seeing the installation as both the subject of and a backdrop to the performance, which I reasoned might stimulate discussion. This proved to be the case, with members of the audience approaching me to discuss the work that may not have done so otherwise, commenting on both elements of the work highlighted by Sneddon and Tonge and individual observations. The spoken-word performance activated a starting point for the audience to be able to articulate and express their own interpretation of the work.

Figure 63 Video still of live performance, BEAF 2012

Feedback suggested that parts of the installation could stand alone as individual works (figure 64). Reflecting upon the photographic documentation of the exhibition, I decided to continue the methodology of photographing the urban environment as a starting point of my next work. Additionally, I decided to limit the materials I used, with a focus on a single material/botanical connection, as I had with the *Brachychiton rupestris linoleumii*, where the plastic bottles resonated with the shape of the bottle tree.

[232] Eleanor Jackson, e-mail message to the author, 31 January 2012.

Figure 64 Julie-Anne Milinski *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents* (detail) 2012

Through my research, I was conscious of the criticism engendered by Steiner and Lenzlinger's haphazard use of consumer packaging. In my installation, all the plastic bottles had been altered in some through way either cutting, sanding, or painting. While I was careful to ensure that the bottles remained recognisable as objects, I wanted the transformations to acknowledge the strength and permanence of the material. Through investing time in applying artistic processes, rather than considering the bottles as a disposable, wasted object, I viewed their permanence in the environment as warranting the same attention to transformation as more traditional art materials, such as bronze or marble. This reflection was to be significant in my development of subsequent artworks during my candidature.

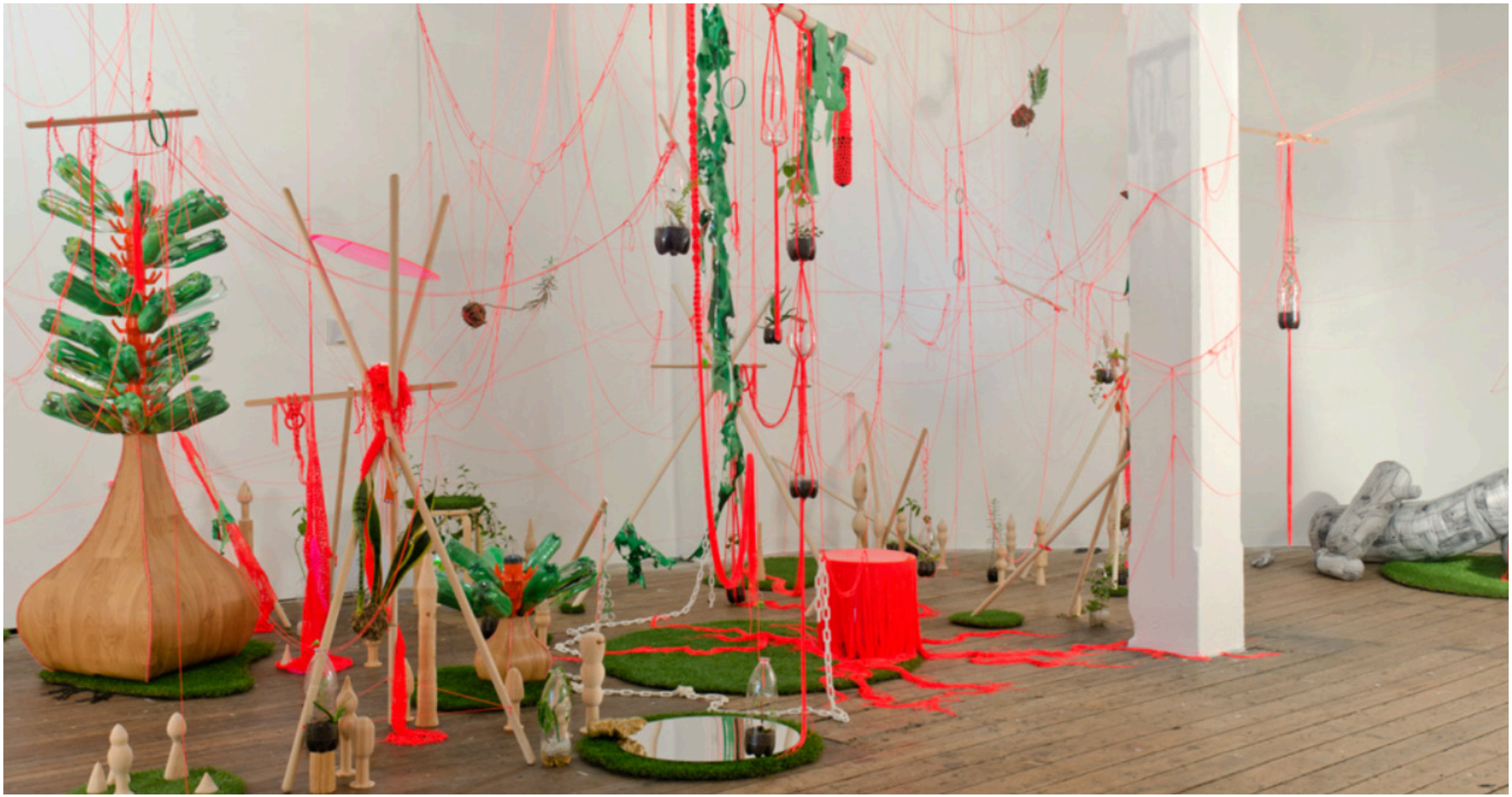

Figure 65 Julie-Anne Milinski *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents* 2012

A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession, 2012–15

A photograph I had taken while walking along the Brisbane River (figure 66) acted as a catalyst for *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* (2012, figure 67–68). My focus when taking this picture was on the pink and yellow flagging tape marking many trees in this area. However, when I analysed the image in the studio later, what struck me most was a green plastic bag caught in a branch. In the image, the bag was static but when I had observed it, the breeze may have animated the bag, making it similar to the moving foliage. Thinking about the omnipresence of plastic rubbish in the landscape and its reluctance to break down, I imagined the bag behaving like a plant, growing and spreading. My intention was to enliven the bag, making visible its agency as an environmental 'creeper'.

Preliminary studio investigations involved working with my household collection of plastic bags, accumulated despite our commitment to reusable bags. In 2008, a KPMG Report on the trial of a charge on plastic carrier bags showed that 61 percent of people re-used these bags as bin-liners, and 58 percent of them felt that they would buy bin-liners if the bags were banned.[233] In Australian cities, states, and territories where plastic carrier bags have been banned, there was an increase in the sales of plastic bin-liners.[234] Four years after South Australia's ban on plastic carrier bags, research conducted by the University of South Australia confirmed that bin-liner sales had increased from 15 to 80 percent.[235] This research would eventually lead to a material shift in my work. Having never purchased bin-liners before, I was enthralled not only with the variety of colours available, but also that some of these products were scented.

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[233] KPMG, *Trial of a Government and Industry Charge on Plastic Bags: Report of Findings,* 20 October 2008, 15, http://www.scew.gov.au/system/files/resources/0c513e54-d968-ac04-758b-3b7613af0d07/files/ps-pbags-rpt-kpmg-final-report-trial-charge-plastic-bags-20081030.pdf.

[234] Mary Westcott, *Plastic Shopping Bags, Research Brief 2010/28*, accessed 22 May 2012, http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/explore/ResearchPublications/ResearchBriefs/2010/RBR201028.pdf.

[235] Martin Aspin, "Review of the Plastic Shopping Bags (Waste Avoidance) Act 2008," *Zero Waste SA,* accessed 2 November 2014, http://www.zerowaste.sa.gov.au/upload/resource-centre/publications/plastic-bag-phase-out/PBActReview_maspin_Nov2012_2%20-%20final.pdf, 8.

Figure 66 Plastic bag in tree, Brisbane River 2012

Initial material experimentations were more directly representational of the Madeira vine, *Anredera cordifolia.* This creeper is a Class C declared plant in Brisbane due to its rampant climbing and cloaking behaviour.[236] While I chose to use motifs associated with threatening the integrity of local landscapes, I wanted to ensure that the work posed a dilemma, being simultaneously seductive yet repellent. Plastic bags, while a symbol of consumerism, are primarily a useful object, as discussed in Chapter 3 through Hawkins's recounting of a scenario where the usefulness of their material presence disrupts negative connotations.[237] Further, depending on their materiality and design, plastic bags can have aesthetically pleasing qualities, as can some flora classified as weeds that pose no threat in their right environment.

[236] Brisbane City Council, "Environmental Weeds," *Brisbane City Council Weed Identification Tool*, accessed 17 March 2015, http://weeds.brisbane.qld.gov.au/controlling-weeds.
[237] Hawkins, "Plastic Materialities," 127.

Hawkins links "being rendered environmentally aware" in contemporary consumer society to the ambivalence with which we relate to waste. Describing the power of the plastic bag as a negative environmental motif, she describes her reaction to a well-known scene from the 1999 film *American Beauty*,

> For me, this scene was haunted. As alive as the bag was, as lyrical as its dance with the wind was, it was still a plastic bag. The aesthetic resonances and animation could not completely override the moral undertones. The bag was rendered beautiful, but this didn't make it good.[238]

Informed by Hawkins's words, I wanted my work to surpass the immediate recognition of the plastic bags, which I found to be less effective in Tayou's work *Plastic Bags* (2001–10, figure 27) critiqued in Chapter 2. Through rigorous testing of installation variations using both re-used carrier bags and scented bin-liner bags, I chose to work solely with the latter to strengthen associations to botany through colour and the olfactory aspect of the bags' synthetic fruity and floral perfumes.

The process of repurposing the bags from objects designed for temporary containment to a robust material capable of supporting greater weight than their original form involves cutting the plastic into strips and crocheting these strips into chain. This manual process of crocheting strengthens the plastic, changing its materiality from a flat surface to a curving, elastic line, revealing the amount of plastic in each bag as a linear distance. Where the strips are joined, knots indicate units of both time and material. The method of making the work involves extensive handling through which the inherent qualities of the plastic are revealed and exploited. Some bags were left uncut and worked into a chain stitch by hand alone forming a thick 'rope', which was a much slower process than using a crochet hook. When installed in the gallery, the work loosely graphs these various rates of production in three dimensions. The work mimics organic processes of growth, which in turn, raises the notion of decay; something that plastic does not readily succumb to.

Interestingly, the information I had reviewed in relation to the statistics of plastic bag usage seemed meaningless in relation to the materiality of bags, offering no information on their size and weight. Hawkins acknowledges the environmentalist critique of recycling as being a panacea to consumerism and of dubious

[238] Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 21.

environmental merit. However, she suggests a potential benefit of recycling is the knowledge acquired through the performative aspect of recycling and the personal contact required to sort through rubbish,

> In making us handle waste differently recycling has made us open to the materiality of waste in ways that chucking it in the bin denies. The boundary between the self and waste become ambiguous when new habits allow wasted things to become more familiar, to imprint us with their phenomenological specificity; the cardboard box that's surprisingly tough to crush, the sharp edge of the empty can. . . . In the physical work of recycling, waste things become incorporated into new movements and habits as the body becomes open to waste.[239]

My extensive physical handling of the plastic created a different engagement with the material, and the time I invested in this transformation was commented on by viewers, with several people curious as to how much time the work took to construct, a question often followed with discussion about the archival quality of the bags and their potent scent.

A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession was shown in *The Line* exhibition at the Webb Gallery, QCA, in 2012 (figure 67). Exhibited as a work in progress, the installation engaged with the air-conditioning duct at the rear of the gallery. This major structural presence makes visible the connection between the outside air and the interior gallery space. A circular crocheted work originally envisaged as a floor work was suspended, and a rosette of rolled pink and orange twine (rose- and orange-scented) was pinned to the back wall; by chance, a shadow cast from the work created a stem (figure 68).

[239] Ibid.

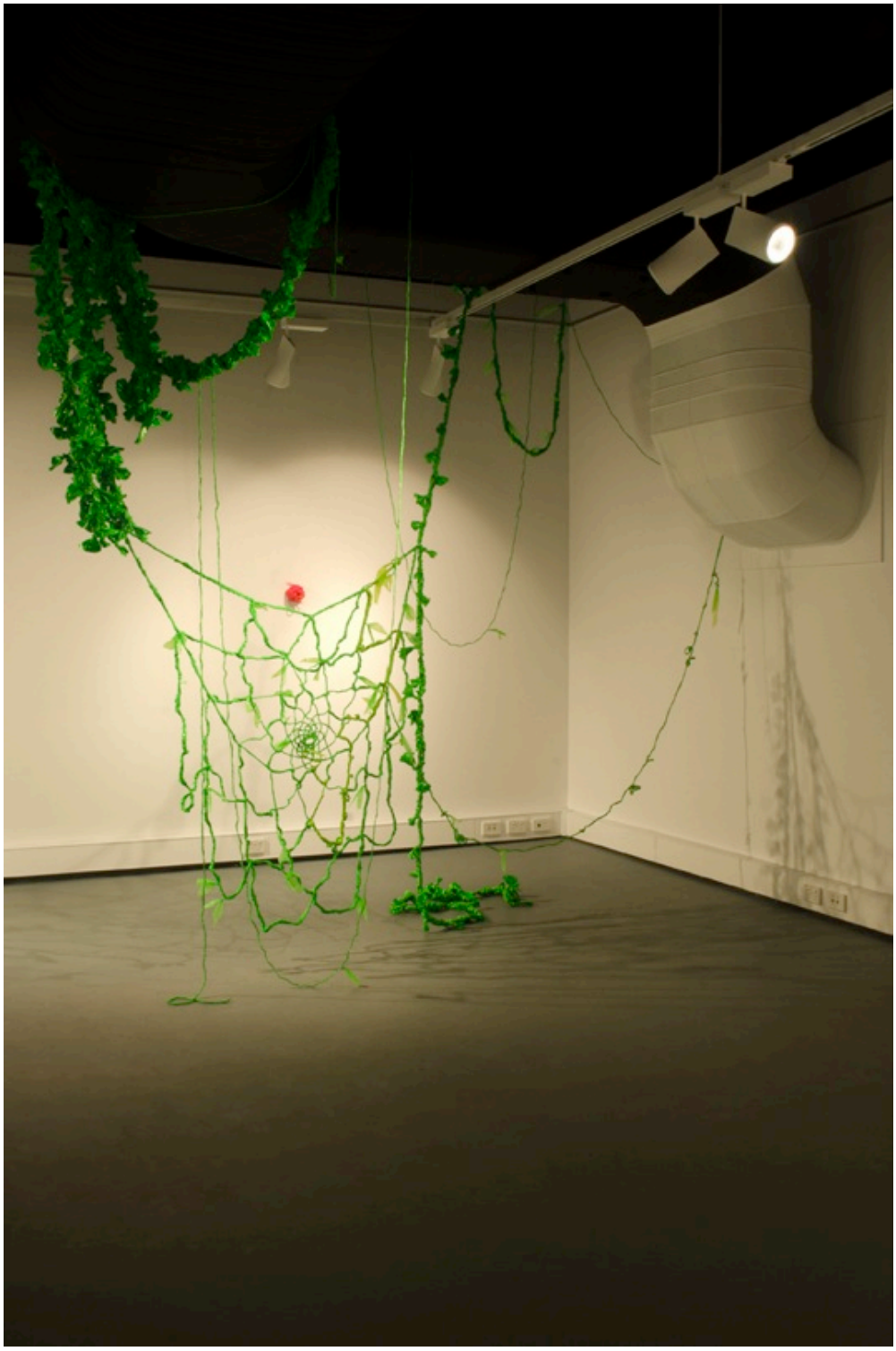

Figure 67 Julie-Anne Milinski *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* 2012

Figure 68 Julie-Anne Milinski *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* 2012 (detail)

The scent of the bin-liner bags triggered discussion among viewers regarding the absurdity and futility of scenting garbage. Hawkins notes the role of hygiene in promoting disposable objects; adding fragrance to mask the aroma of garbage would seem to take this a step further.[240] Some viewers described the circular work as a spider's web, something unintended, as I had originally imagined it as a floor work. Overall, I felt that the work lacked tension and I was not satisfied with the way it simply hung in the space. The feedback I received was largely positive, but it was agreed that the work would benefit by being more profuse.

The completed work was exhibited in June 2015 in the White Studio (figure 69), with more complexity and randomness in the work than the original installation, which more effectively conveyed the research focus. The installation required an element of appeal through colour, detail, and intrigue—something aesthetically seductive that

[240] Ibid., 26.

resonated with ideas of consumerism and desire, so that the bags were not just a repugnant, environmentally detrimental material. However, so that it was not merely decorative, I also sought to create a degree of tension or anxiety in the work. When the work was shown 'in progress' in 2012, I was not overly concerned with the way the web hung. However, the more I researched Bennett's argument on acknowledging the vitality of non-living materials, which resonated with my original photograph of the plastic bag fluttering in the tree on the banks of the Brisbane River, the more I wanted the plastic bags to appear to have a life of their own. The idea that the plastic bags were proliferating or, as Bennett would argue, had a material vibrancy, was crucial. I addressed the issue of the flaccidity by pulling the centre of the web up and back, creating a dynamic void space. The crocheted twine used to pull the work back was fashioned to look like vines in a combination of tautness and drooping strands (figure 69).

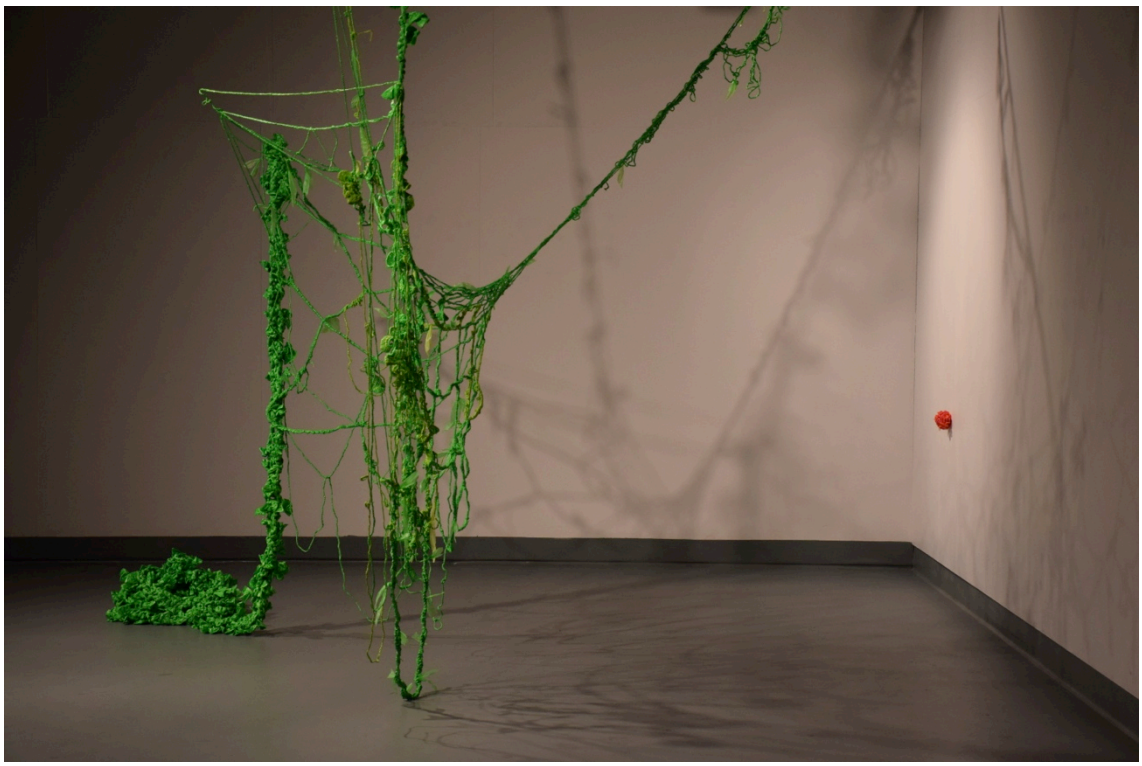

Figure 69 Julie-Anne Milinski *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* 2012–15

Over the course of the week, I continued to experiment to achieve an element of seduction or intrigue with the work while at the same time ensuring that the unease remained. I did this bearing in mind Langford's effective use of plastic packaging in

her work *The High Country* (2012, figure 25) where the artist teased out the life in the materials, and also remembering the inertia of Tayou's flaccid bags that, while impotent, had a daunting presence.

Figure 70 Julie-Anne Milinski *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* 2012–15

A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession successfully suggests notions of the botanical albeit in an unsettling, synthetic environment. The vibrancy of the material is highlighted through its mimicry of growth and insinuation into the gallery ceiling's framework, as a living vine would weave itself into the built environment. While raising notions of the detriment of plastic bags, it aims to do so with an understanding of the seduction at play in consumer society. The human scale of the work, particularly the web, seeks to engage the viewer in an encounter that is intimate, with the detail in the web drawing in their gaze.

Wilhelmina Szeretlek! 2012–13

There is a similarity between plants classified as weeds and discarded plastic packaging, in that they can both cause harm to indigenous plants and wildlife when they encroach on natural environments. However, weeds are less visually disruptive and often their menace is not immediately apparent. Our familiarity with certain popular plants also helps them to blend into the landscape. One such plant is the *Sansevieria trifasciata*, which is a widespread indoor and landscaping plant as a result of its robustness and tolerance of low light. The fascination I have around this plant originates from its presence in both the exterior and interior environments, which prescribes different meanings to the plants. As an environmental weed in the Seven Hills Bushland reserve near my home, the plant is evident on the borders of the reserve where it has spread from neighbouring domestic gardens. For my late mother-in-law Wilhelmina Milinski, the *Sansevieria* was a treasured houseplant, with her own plant, grown from a cutting given to her by a relative and placed in her Melbourne sunroom, more than forty years old (figure 71).[241] The Brisbane City Council classifies *Sansevieria trifasciata* as a Class R, low-priority, pest species.[242] It recommends that its population be reduced "as part of routine maintenance".[243] The threat posed by the plants is their ability to spread into large colonies through creeping underground stems. Additionally, just a small piece of leaf or root is enough to propagate a new plant, so the main method of dispersal of the species is at sites where garden waste is dumped.[244]

The plant's common name, 'mother-in-law's tongue', draws a comparison between the stiff, lance-shaped leaves of the plants and the sharp, cutting words that may be spoken by one's mother-in-law. English was my mother-in-law's second language, and she frequently used expressions that become ambiguous and humorous rather than unkind. Growing with such vigour, the long leaves of Wilhelmina's *Sansevieria* required binding with rope to stay upright. Despite being a drought-tolerant plant, Wilhelmina's plant was permanently situated in a blue tub filled with water.

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[241] Wilhelmina Milinski, conversation with the author, August 2013.
[242] Brisbane City Council, "Weed Classification and "Environmental Weeds."
[243] Ibid.
[244] Brisbane City Council, "Mother-in-law's Tongue," *Brisbane City Council Weed Identification Tool*, accessed 12 March 2015, http://weeds.brisbane.qld.gov.au/weeds/mother-laws-tongue.

Figure 71 Wilhelmina's *Sansevieria trifasciata,* Carnegie, Melbourne 2013

While researching the plant, I viewed a TED talk by Kamal Meattle, an environmental activist whose personal experience with breathing difficulties due to degraded air quality in New Delhi led him to create office spaces where *Sansevieria trifasciata* is used in conjunction with two other plants, the Acera Palm (*Chrysalidocarpus lutescens*) and the Money Plant (*Epipremnum aureum*) to improve air quality.[245] His research documents how these plants have proven to be capable of enhancing humans' indoor environments, demonstrating that introducing approximately 1,200 plants to a 50,000-square-feet, twenty-year-old building housing 300 human occupants caused a marked improvement to their air quality.[246] He states, "compared to other buildings, there is a reduced incidence of eye irritation by 52 percent,

[245] Kamal Meattle, "How to Grow Fresh Air," TED video, 4:04, accessed 4 May 2013, http://www.ted.com/talks/kamal_meattle_on_how_to_grow_your_own_fresh_air?language=en.
[246] Ibid.

respiratory systems by 34 percent, headaches by 24 percent, lung impairment by 12 percent and asthma by nine percent."[247] Meattle credits NASA's research as raising his awareness to the air-purifying properties of plants.[248] As mentioned previously, NASA's commissioned report "Interior Landscape Plants for Indoor Air Pollution Abatement" of 1989 notes the connection between various health issues and the presence of various organic compounds emitted from synthetic materials in enclosed environments.[249] The report documents the effectiveness of using indoor plants to decrease levels of formaldehyde, benzene and trichloroethylene in a sealed environment.[250] The exchanges between plants, the environment, and humans that the report outlines reinforce the agency of plants, and the reciprocity in this relationship. Meattle's statistics verify the exchange between humans, the office environment, and the plants. What the human occupants, furniture, and other contents exhale and emit, the plants filter from the air. Therefore, they are not passive occupants, but active, valued contributors to the air quality of the shared habitat.

As a starting point for *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* (figures 72–75), I focussed on the conflict between the local classification of *Sansevieria trifasciata* as an environmental weed, a negative connotation, and its positive value as an indoor plant that converts carbon dioxide into oxygen at night.[251] Considering the dilemma of whether to "reduce the population" of the plant as per the Brisbane City Council's instructions[252] or afford it the tender care, including daily leaf-wiping, that Meattle suggests,[253] I arrived at the decision to both control and care for the plant. Through the title of the work, I play on the common name of the plant and acknowledge my mother-in-law Wilhelmina, who was an avid painter, craftsperson, and gardener. *Szeretlek* means 'I love you' in Hungarian, my mother-in-law's native language (tongue). Just as Starling's *Rescued Rhododendrons* (figure 46) were the protagonist for multiple contemporary concepts—the species' origins and migration, its popularity as an ornamental plant, and its potentially detrimental environmental impact depending on where it is planted, the role of the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* was fundamental.

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[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Wolverton, Johnson, and Bounds, "Interior Landscape Plants for Indoor Air Pollution Abatement."
[250] Ibid., 3–5.
[251] Meattle, "How to Grow Fresh Air."
[252] Brisbane City Council, "Weed Classification."
[253] Meattle, "How to Grow Fresh Air."

Figure 72 Julie-Anne Milinski *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* (detail) 2012–3

The plants used in this work were sourced from friends' gardens and the Seven Hills Bushland Reserve due to their scarcity in local nurseries in 2012.[254] The cuttings were divided, wrapped in hessian with a minimal amount of soil, and bound together with string. I then crocheted 'cosies' from nylon builders line for each plant, which concurrently bound and restricted the growth of the plant and provided a container for their soil (figure 72). Prosthetic leaves were attached to damaged plants and broken leaves were stitched together (figure 73). These were quite visceral interactions with the plants, where sap would ooze from the freshly cut holes and the distinct smell of the cut leaves would fill the air. Pom-poms on lengths of chain stitch reference the practice of using rocks and chains as tools used to manipulate the directional growth

[254] This situation changed over the course of my candidacy, with the plant now commonly available at nurseries in Brisbane despite the City Council's directive to reduce the population.

of larger plants and trees. The fluorescent colours of the nylon builders line are prevalent in high-visibility equipment and safety-wear on construction sites. The builders line is a material connection to concepts of boundaries, which is what it is used to create in construction and landscaping. The *Sansevieria*'s classification in Australia differs along state and territory boundaries, being "regarded as an environmental weed in Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory, and as a 'sleeper weed' in other parts of Australia". Grown in containers indoors, the plant appears to be enjoying a return to fashion as part of the general renewed interest in indoor plants.[255] However, if planted in the garden, it will spread rapidly if it is not contained. Falling out of fashion results in some indoor plants ending up in external environments through dumping of plants and cuttings where they become an environmental issue.

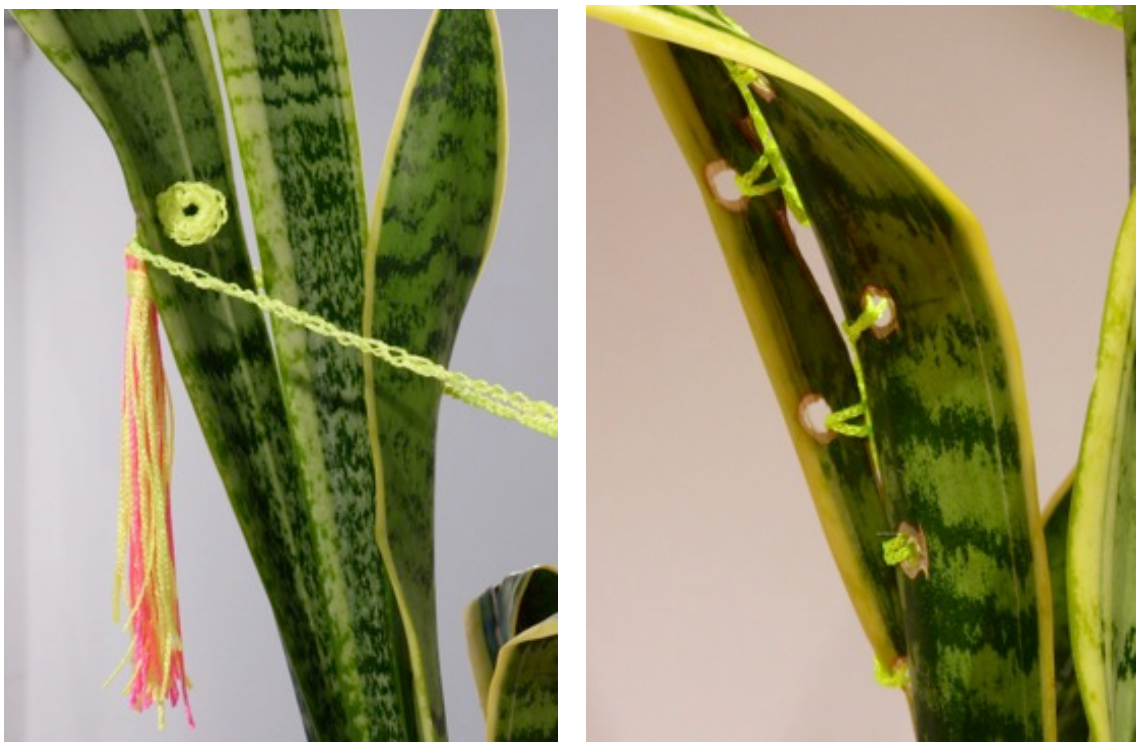

Figure 73 Julie-Anne Milinski *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* (detail) 2012–3

[255] I observed many examples of *Sansevierias* in restaurants, hotels, and retail stores in Paris, London, New York and Singapore during the course of this project.

Figure 74 Julie-Anne Milinski *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* (trial installation) 2012–13

The works were positioned on wooden plant stands constructed to enable an arrangement of the works at different heights and in different dialogues with each other. The stands were constructed on a scale intended to be both precarious and relatable to dimensions of the human body (figure 74). This method of presenting the work also implied a domestic setting, with crocheted doilies reinforcing this connection. Through trial installations and peer feedback, some plants migrated to the floor, with the intention that it appears as if they are escaping their domestic containment. In her critique of the work during a trial installation in 2013, Melbourne artist Susan Jacobs described the plants as being cute but unnerving, and pushing against domestic primness. She curiously noted that it reminded her of Chinese foot-binding and breeding animals to stay small and cute, an interesting association given my experience with hormone therapy to limit my height. Initially, I wondered if the

cosies would stunt the growth of the plant, which it did in some cases where the plant was small to start with. Larger specimens fought harder against this 'soft-bonsai' technique, pushing through their bindings within a year. As I watched these plants force their way through the cosies, I recalled wild imaginings of my bones breaking through skin, neither contained nor restrained. As the plants grew, they were shaped by both care and control, asserting their will to grow no matter how contorted.

Through further feedback, I ascertained that the work had more liveliness on the floor, with the removal of the stands liberating the works from the domestic, and making them appear more mobile (figure 75). The viewer could then walk in and around the plants. Additionally, the doily demarcates areas within which the plants can be situated or excluded from. The doily's deviation from the regularity of the pattern of the interior to a more haphazard spreading of the exterior loops implies something running amok, a freak growth no longer conforming to a pre-determined arrangement (figure 76).

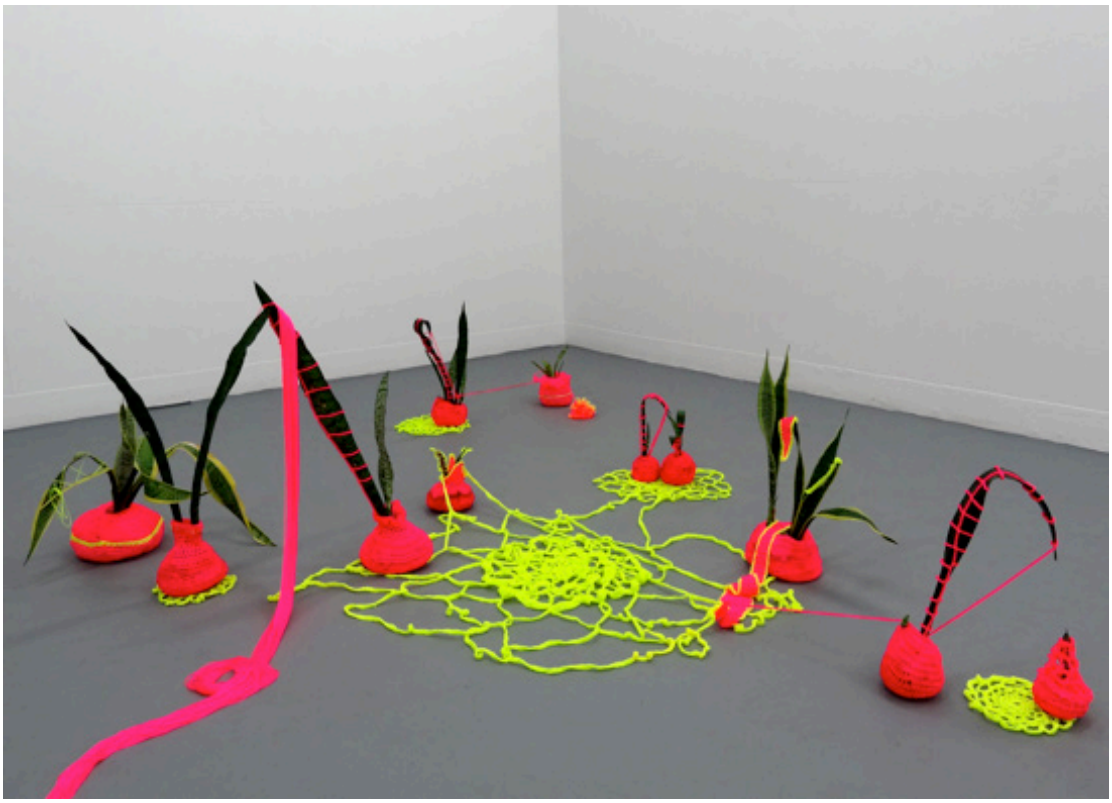

Figure 75 Julie-Anne Milinski *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* (trial installation) 2012–3

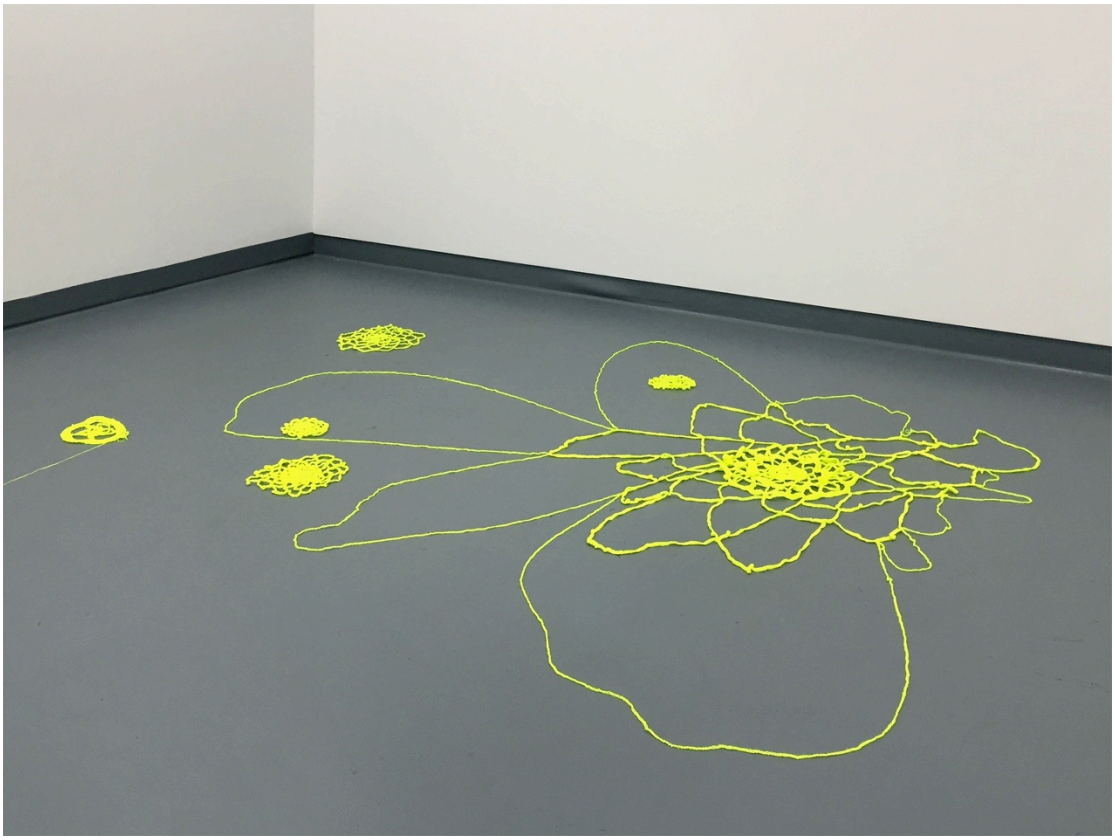

Figure 76 Studio documentation, rampant doilies 2015

Wilhelmina Szeretlek! was exhibited at Bleeding Hearts Gallery, Brisbane, as part of the exhibition *RGBcmyk* (2012) curated by Monica Rohan and also at QCA and the University of Southern Queensland in *Down the Rabbit Hole* (2013) curated by Sebastian Di Mauro and Beata Batorowicz. In the second instance, new plants were struck from these existing works, growing into new shapes that inspired new forms and arrangements. The different generations were evident—the new cuttings appeared small and fresh, while their parent plants seemed older and wearier in their water-stained cosies. *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* successfully demonstrated my exploration of the agency of botany and inferred an interdependency between human and plant, since the artworks were created around and relied on the plant's growth. The relatively mundane plant, common in Brisbane urban areas as both a house plant and an environmental weed, demonstrated the ability of botany in an artwork to act as a metonym for the wider natural environment.

Geniculum, 2013

The works in *Geniculum*[256] (2013, figures 80-85) demonstrated most directly the influence and evidence of the botanical drawing classes I had completed earlier that year. Extending on thoughts that arose during the making of previous artworks, I was experimenting with ideas that resided in the blurred space between dichotomies: built/botanical, culture/nature, inorganic/organic, masculine/feminine, mass-produced/hand-made, and art/craft. The prominence of flagging tape in photographic research documentation collected from local parklands had led me to experiment with the material. Flagging tape denotes areas undergoing change brought about by humans, and was a ubiquitous presence in riverside parklands in the Brisbane CBD—namely, Southbank Parklands and the Brisbane Botanical Gardens—due to ongoing repairs caused by the 2011 floods. I transformed this mass-produced, uniform, and quotidian material through the process of crocheting, so that it became soft, fleshy, and substantial. While I was working with the material, its durability became apparent, and it altered from a material intended as a temporary marker to a robust form with significant weight and strength.

I continued working with crocheted forms as a conflation of leaf shapes from photographic source material of plants in the Brisbane Botanical Gardens. I had experimented with the soft forms as both wall and floor works, but had yet to arrive at a resolution that would speak to the concerns of the research. I considered how I could use the flagging tape to 'flag' my human endeavours to shape a botanical specimen, creating a hybrid that was simultaneously familiar and strange, as if the plant had morphed with the flagging tape and now incorporated it into its structure, in a similar fashion to the plastiglomerates discussed in Chapter 2 where rock subsumes plastic.

[256] "*Geniculum* (Latin), n. a knot in a plant." D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's New Latin–English, English–Latin Dictionary* (London: Cassell, 1968), 263. *Geniculum* was shown at The Hold Artspace, West End, in November 2013.

Figure 77. Julie-Anne Milinski Work in progress (trial installation) 2013

During this time, I was also investigating the jungle paintings of Henri Rousseau (figure 78) to analyse the methodology he used to find the 'wild' in the city. Rousseau found Paris's botanical and zoological gardens sources of inspiration and subject matter for his artworks. In 2012, I had visited the Jardin des Plantes and Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, two sites that he regularly frequented in order to transport his imagination beyond the urban realm. He is said to have commented "when I go into the glass houses and I see those strange plants from exotic countries, it seems to me that I enter into a dream. I feel I am somebody else completely."[257] For Rousseau, the urban botanical and zoological gardens transported him to a distant and surreal environment. In his paintings, the artist was able to liberate the caged animals and exotic glasshouse plants, interpret them "without the slightest truth to life", and re-

[257] Henri Rousseau cited in Christopher Green, "Souvenirs of the Jardin des Plantes: Making the Exotic Strange Again," in *Henri Rousseau: Jungles in Paris*, ed. Frances Morris and Christopher Green, ex. cat. (New York: Abrams), 41.

situate them in a jungle entirely of his own dreaming.[258] While rumours circulated that Rousseau's military service in Mexico provided him with experiences of tropical forests in Mexico, he never left France, and "was happy to confess that his Mexican stories were confabulation".[259] As Frances Morris confirms,

> Despite Apollinaire's claim that Rousseau's military service in Mexico provided him with memories of "tropical forests, the monkeys, and the bizarre flowers", we know from direct testimony that it was the splendid plantations of Paris hot houses and dusty cages of exotic creatures in the zoological gardens that more immediately generated these compelling visions.[260]

Figure 78 Henri Rousseau *The Dream* 1910

In the spirit of Rousseau, I turned to Brisbane's Botanical Gardens and surrounding parks in search of exotic-looking plants that were also commonplace in the local area. I settled on the *Monstera deliciosa*, a plant with very distinctive leaves that grows in abundance in Brisbane. Larger specimens of the plant in the Botanical Gardens climb trees, tenaciously clinging to the trunks with their aerial roots. Less impressive scale wise, a nonetheless interesting specimen was located in the QCA Southbank Library,

[258] Italian painter-critic Ardengo Soffici cited in ibid., 37.
[259] Ibid., 30.
[260] Frances Morris, "Jungles in Paris," in *Henri Rousseau: Jungles in Paris*, 14.

which I borrowed to use as a drawing study. Neglect and lack of a vertical structural support to climb had forced the plant to grow into a low, tortured formation (figure 79).

Figure 79 *Monstera deliciosa* QCA Library 2013

The plant resided in my studio for some time, during which I came to know every leaf and stem through prolonged study (drawing and photography). In order to capture less-familiar perspectives of the plant, I elevated it onto a high table. By sitting on the floor and looking up at the underside of the *Monstera* leaves, I was able to invoke a sense of uncanniness about the plant. Its scale seemed to increase—I could imagine that the plant was towering overhead as it would in a rainforest. I became enthralled by its tortured kinks and twists. My viewpoint also offered a focus on the stems rather than its decorative leaves. I witnessed the strange, elbow-like bends producing new heart-shaped leaves. From preparatory photographs and sketches, I produced three final drawings, all graphite and acrylic ground on marine plywood.

Figure 80 Julie-Anne Milinski *geniculum drawing study #1 (observation + forgetting MHO5/6)* 2013

These drawings demonstrated the close studies of the botanical specimen that informed the work of the *Monstera Mirabilis* (figure 83). They also offered perspectives of the *Monstera deliciosa* as I had come to view it in the studio. While adhering to the conventions of botanical drawing in attempting to depict the plant with scientific accuracy, the drawings also relied on artistic compositional strategies to reveal a unique plant rather than an example of a species.

Geniculum drawing study #1 (observation+forgetting MHO5/6) (figure 80) refers to my botanical drawing instructor, Margaret Hastie. I used this title to acknowledge that my compositional decisions were at odds with Hastie's expert advice, but very much in

the spirit of her insistence that her students continually question the rigid rules of botanical drawing with which she instructed her classes. The second drawing, *Geniculum drawing study #2 (observation+reflection on G.O.)* (figure 81), acknowledges the influence of cropping techniques used by Georgia O'Keeffe to create intriguing botanical imagery. I had taken numerous photographs, which I would then crop to arrive at compositions for the drawings. The third drawing, *Geniculum drawing study #3 (observation+reflection on H.R.)* (figure 82), refers to Henri Rousseau who would exaggerate the scale of certain plant leaves in his paintings (figure 78).

Figure 81 Julie-Anne Milinski *geniculum drawing study #2 (observation + reflection on G.O.)* 2013

Figure 82 Julie-Anne Milinski *geniculum drawing study #3 (observation + reflection on H.R.)* 2013

Monstera Mirabilis was fabricated from flagging tape, wire, and a *Monstera deliciosa* plant grown from a cutting taken from the QCA Library's plant. Whereas in the Library, the plant had no support structure, which thwarted its attempts to climb and thrive, in my work not only was the plant nurtured, but also elevated from its mundane existence. *Monstera Mirabilis* (figure 83) highlighted the liveliness of both plant and the flagging tape material, and, through proximity of real and artificial, asked the viewer to contemplate hybrid aesthetic possibilities.

Figure 83 Julie-Anne Milinski *Monstera mirabilis* 2013

Tracing patterns from the plant's leaves that I then crocheted, I 'grew' the *Monstera* with these constructed additions. A structure of plastic-covered wire formed a container for the living plant and became the framework for leaves on long stems, creating a hybrid of organic and synthetic materials. The constructed leaves and stems both supported and contained the plant, as well as providing a visual contrast. The crocheted leaves on wire stems were carefully weighted so that the plant was never still—many of the stems were struggling with the weight of the foliage. A single coil of wire extended to the right gallery wall with a single leaf at its tip. This leaf was in the path of the vent of an air-conditioning unit, animating both it and the rest of the wired leaves. The precarious arrangement of these wired tendrils ensured that even

the slight air displacement created by viewers navigating the work also contributed to the motion of the plant. This immediate visual registering of the impact of human activity on the plant, enlivening its synthetic prosthetics, sought to establish an interaction between viewer and plant. The larger flaccid leaves slumped on the floor, their weightiness providing a counter to the aerial leaves.

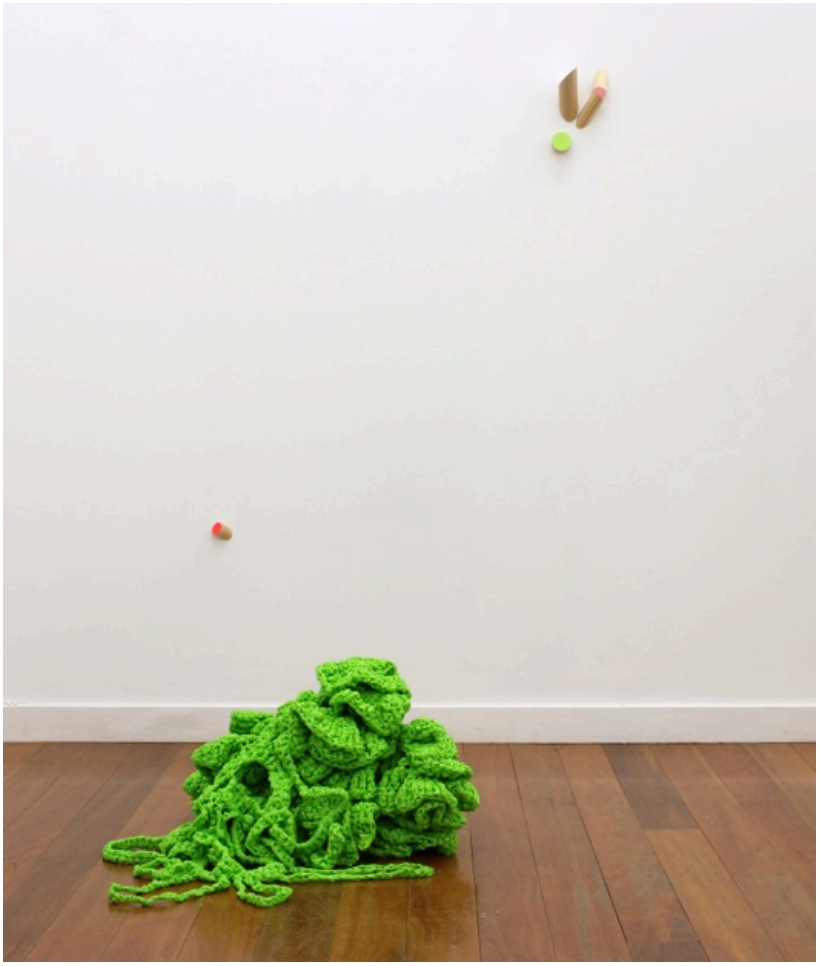

Figure 84 Julie-Anne Milinski *1.194 km (green-mound drawing)* 2013

A separated floor-based crocheted form (figure 84) is a conflation of leaf shapes that reference botanical specimens in the Brisbane Botanical Gardens, collapsed into a single hybrid mutations with something vaguely familiar in the folds of fleshy, green plastic leaves. A discreet, pink protrusion emerging from the mound acted as a lure, inviting closer inspection. Wooden nodules protruding from the walls were painted in high-visibility colours to alert their presence (figure 85). This is a technique used in tree removal, where stumps close to ground heights are painted a fluorescent colour to avoid being a trip hazard. By adhering the small wooden pieces flush to the wall and

floor, my intention was to allude to these emergents as being something that had grown through the plasterboard, puncturing the gallery walls and raising questions of their origins. In arranging the nodules, I referenced photographs of branch growth patterns, further alluding to a natural process. By insinuating an agency in the wooden dowel pieces, I hoped to return liveliness to the wood, a reminder of its growing and branching history. The fluorescent paint cast a glow that contributed to this vibrancy.

Figure 85 Julie-Anne Milinski *emerge/recede (branch studies)* 2013

Geniculum presented an exhibition that took visual cues from urban botanical sites and explored an engagement between plant and human. The presence of viewers in the gallery caused the *Monstera mirabilis* floor work to tremble, making visible the human influence on the environment. Presenting an extreme of artificiality in the representation of aspects of nature, the works respond to the hybridity of contemporary urban experience, where the evidence of human control and maintenance in natural environments is as familiar as the plants themselves. The hybridity of the *Monstera deliciosa*, partly real plant and partly human-engineered, used the juxtaposition of organic and synthetic materials to illuminate and exaggerate the vibrancy of materials. Much audience discussion around the care of the plant and how it would survive without sunlight and water for the duration of the exhibition reiterated that both reciprocity and interdependence were evident in the work.

Jardinière, 2014

> There are some English words which have no equivalent in French, but then there are a great many more French words . . . for which we have no English. One of these is *jardinière*. Even in French it does not quite rightly express its meaning, because the obvious meaning of *jardinière* is female gardener, whereas what we understand by it . . . is a receptacle for holding pot-plants.
>
> —Gertrude Jekyll (1907)[261]

Gertrude Jekyll's musings about the French word *jardinière* having dual meanings inspired the title of an exhibition I held in 2014, while Catherine Horwood's history of indoor plants stimulated ideas surrounding the notion of containment as a barrier between nature and culture. The way that plants reside in the urban environment can be imagined as a series of containers and containments. Plants purchased from nurseries come packaged in a plastic container, and with some then planted in a garden bed or more decorative pot, the plastic container quickly becomes redundant. The garden bed may be viewed as the next level of containment, then the house-yard, the park, and beyond. Once out of the container, some specimens require vigilance to stop them from spreading and taking over as much space as they can physically occupy. While the built environment is frequently partitioned with garden edging and barriers, plants may not recognise these borders and experience them as a temporary disruption to their colonisation efforts.

Horwood's history of plants in the home provided both visual and conceptual provocations to this studio investigation, particularly as the role of indoor plants was not solely for their visual appeal. While initially some of the reasons for introducing plants indoors included keeping "exoticks" alive in cold climates (e.g., oranges in England), the masking of odours and medicinal uses also became reasons for growing particular plants indoors.[262] My attraction with bringing plants into the gallery space was a question of proximity, and from previous works, I had established that introducing botany into artworks approximated a more intimate encounter for the viewer, similar to that of a gardener, and through the work, promoted the plants as lively occupants in the space rather than passive organic matter. The gardeners' unique viewpoint is recognised by Sander-Regier when he says,

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[261] Gertrude Jekyll (1907) cited in Catherine Horwood, *Potted History: The Story of Plants in the Home* (London: Francis Lincoln Ltd, 2007), 153.
[262] Ibid., 15–20.

> The botanical agency of presence, of plants 'being there' and making a strong impression, reinforces the general perception of plants as being immobile, not a mistaken notion, considering they are essentially rooted in one spot. But rootedness does not mean plants are incapable of action, an important aspect of the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of agency. . . . Botanical action and aliveness manifest their nuances to those who are present in the garden to experience it—like gardeners.[263]

Jardinière, exhibited from May to June 2014 at artisan in Brisbane, responded to the intimate scale of the gallery space, 3.7 x 2.6 metres, with the idea of reworking the *Monstera Mirabilis* work. Extending on materials and offering a more imposing scale, this work would embrace *jardinière's* dual meanings described in Jekyll's comments by being both a receptacle for a plant and a monument of a female gardener. The position of the entry point of the gallery was also crucial to the early stages of my planning; on approach, the doorway allowed only a limited view into the gallery and I wanted the first thing visible to be a curious lure, and only a partial indicator as to what lied around the corner.

During my initial investigation as to how I might fabricate my *jardinière*, my thoughts repeatedly returned to a contemporary, iconic receptacle for plants, Jeff Koons's *Puppy (Vase)* (1998, figure 86), with its smooth white ceramic waves of puppy fur.[264] Initially, I investigated having a fibreglass stand manufactured to my design so that the surface would be smooth and slick. I constructed a maquette attaching plastic containers and bottles cut into botanically inspired shapes (figure 87). This experimentation led me to imagine *Jardinière* as a tower of plastic waste, an un-monument, to borrow the term from the exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, a survey of sculpture at New Museum in New York in 2007. Massimiliano Gioni's description of these contemporary sculptural works resonated with me in both his conceptual and metaphorical observations,

> The work of many sculptors at the beginning of this new century, in fact, depicts a society that is so dramatically suffocating under the weight of toxic waste that it is now forced to turn garbage into an art form. And yet it is not the realm of artificiality that these sculptors inhabit. There is something slightly organic to the way these sculptures grown and expand, like twisted branches and tortured trees. The forms of this twenty first century sculpture evoke a kind of urban vegetation; they grow like weeds or like the strange, mutant flora that mysteriously spring up

[263] Sander-Regier, "Bare Roots," 69.

[264] Koons's *Vase* number 931 from an edition of 3000 sold for $18,750 on 21 April 2015. See http://www.phillips.com/detail/JEFF-KOONS/NY030115/298?fromSearch=jeff&searchPage=1.

> in community gardens, where the natural and the artificial slowly come to resemble one another.[265]

Gioni's evocation of a mutant, urban vegetation instantly brought to mind my *Monstera mirabilis.* It also assisted me in determining that these waste materials needed to be embedded in the final piece rather than having an empty fibreglass shell formed in their likeness, which I realised was no longer authentic or relevant.

Figure 86 Jeff Koons *Puppy (Vase)* 1998

The internal structure of the work needed to be strong enough to support the weight of the plant and wired crocheted leaves. Fabricated from plywood and PVC pipe, layers of cut plastic bottles and containers were attached to the framework, covered in plaster bandage for strength, with a layer of plaster of Paris encrusting the surface (figure 87). In places, the end result appeared as a contemporary take on classical architectural decorative plaster mouldings with vegetal references. Cutting the packaging was an illuminating experience in the same way that cutting the plastic bags had revealed their strength. Given all the containers were designed for single

[265] Massimiliano Gioni, "Ask the Dust," in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, ed. Richard Flood, ex. cat. (New York; London: Phaidon in association with New Museum, 2007), 65–66.

use, their robustness was alarming. The materiality of the plastic and plaster provided contrasts of traditional and contemporary sculpture materials, and of strength and fragility. Builders foam was used to fill larger gaps, oozing and erupting as it made its way through crevices between the plastered, plastic forms.

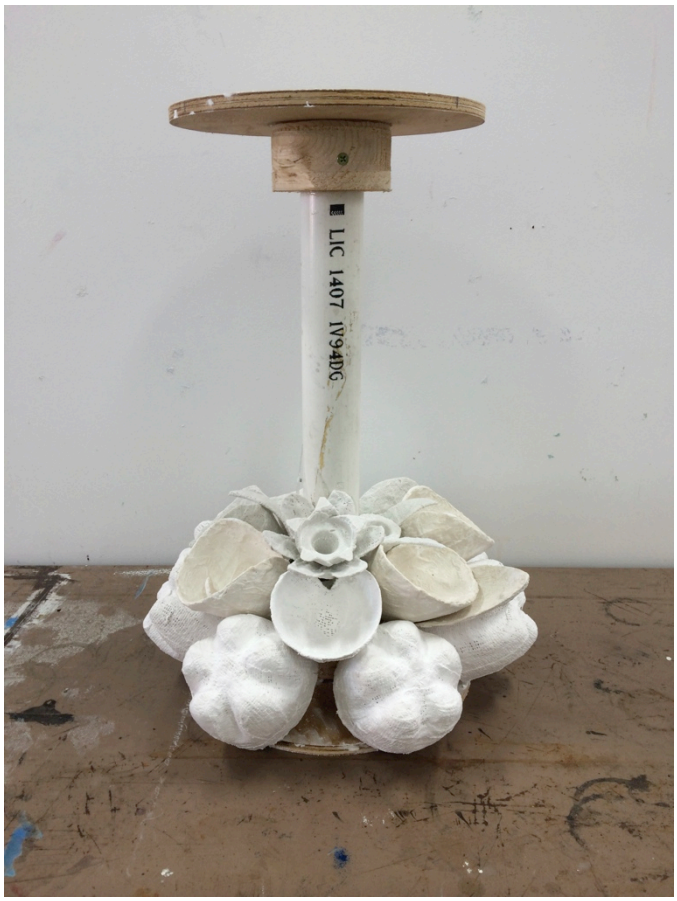

Figure 87 Studio documentation, maquette 2014

The work was painted fluorescent yellow then over-sprayed with gloss white, so that a toxic glow remained in the crevices (figure 88). This amplified the seductive qualities of the materials' surface, understanding that seduction can be vital to entice one to consuming commodities beyond necessity. By momentarily suspending judgment of the material, I wanted the viewer to see the structure as a whole before recognising identifiable shapes of plastic bottles in the substructure. A frequent comment I received about the *Jardinière* was that it appeared "edible", with comparisons made to cake icing, confectionary, and ice cream; one viewer said that it looked as though it would taste "delicious, but be bad for you".

Figure 88 Julie-Anne Milinski *Jardinière* (detail) 2014

This function of surface related to a description of Piccinini's work, where Jacqueline Millner gives evidence of the artist employing the aesthetic tactics of advertising and consumer design, noting that "it is attentive to formal exigencies such as colour and composition, it is well finished often to the point of slick."[266] The slickness in works such as *Summer Love* (figure 89) begins with the fibreglass structure and is emphasised by the gloss automotive paint, with Piccinini's conceptual focus firmly on the machine and technology. The surface of the *Jardinière* is glossy; however, the thin veneer of paint contrasts with its congealed mass of plastic packaging, not attempting to disguise the 'underbelly' of the work. It has an aesthetic of the domestic rather than the factory. My decision to always retain the evidence of the human hand in the works is in keeping with my investigation's focus on human interactions with botany rather than scientific or mechanical aspects such as genetic modification and agriculture.

[266] Jacqueline Millner, "Love in the Age of Intelligent Machines," in *Conceptual Beauty: Perspectives on Australian Contemporary Art* (Sydney: Artspace, 2010), 20.

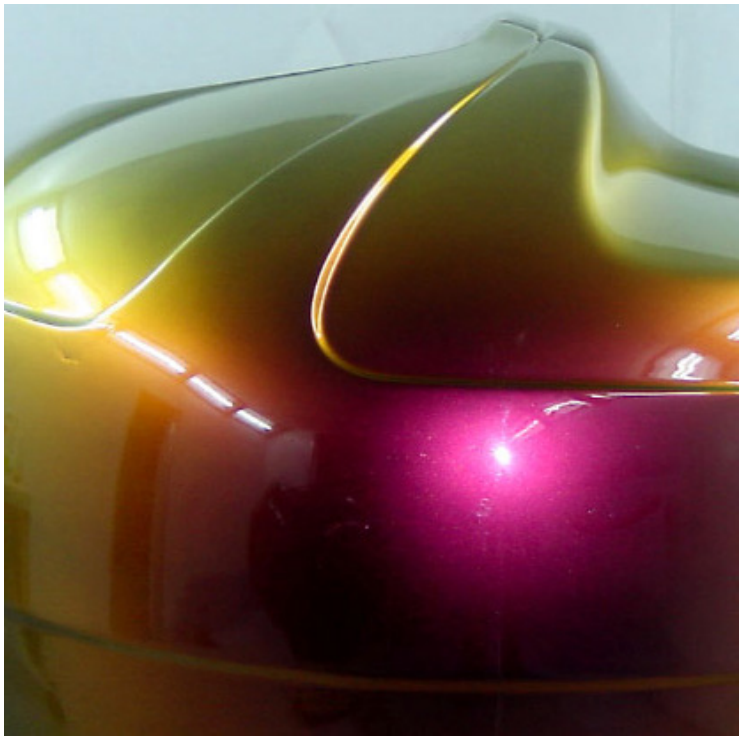

Figure 89 Patricia Piccinini *Summer Love* 2001 (detail)

While *Monstera deliciosa* grow successfully indoors, it is uncommon for the plant to flower and bear fruit (figure 90). However, when a plant does bear fruit it is commonly referred to as the 'fruit-salad fruit' because of its strange combination of fruit flavours—typically, jackfruit and pineapple. The *Jardinière* exhibition contained a large fruit crocheted from plastic flagging tape, measuring 150 centimetres long and 106 centimetres at its widest and weighing 9.5 kilograms, including the white sheath (figure 91). The soft sculpture was slumped against the wall, which gave a flaccid quality to the exaggerated, comically phallic shape. The fruit is a lure into the space, a folly. The odd plastic fruit is the mutant offspring of its hybrid parent *Monstera* plant, part organic and part plastic.

Figure 90 *Monstera deliciosa* fruit and flower, SW1 Offices, South Brisbane (near my studio in Southbank) 2014

Figure 91 Julie-Anne Milinski *Soft deliciosa* 2014

I designed a wallpaper using a botanical drawing to be installed behind the work, however when trialled in the studio and critiqued with peers and supervisors, it became apparent that the pattern was too distracting given the detail in the *Jardinière* itself (figure 94). Instead, one wall of the gallery was painted pale pink. Barely perceptible, the colour made the work's silhouette more pronounced, and the colour of the stand slightly more artificial.

Figure 92 *Jardinière* in progress with wallpaper experimentation 2014

During the making of the *Jardinière* stand, I imagined it to be a statuesque, female gardener, the pot forming a head and the stand an elongated body. In my anthropomorphising of the work, I came to regard it as a taller version of myself—me at my natural height, sharing the studio space. The scale of the work and the plaster of Paris crust made it difficult to move, and while I had contended with the fragility of the plaster throughout the entire construction process, transporting the work to the gallery proved to be a challenge. I constructed a wooden crate to facilitate the move (figure 93), and in its travel packaging, the work's fragile shell did not need to be handled. It brought to mind the nonsensical need of packaging for packaging—but this is not so unusual in that all consumer packaging is boxed then crated as consumer goods are

shipped from one country to another. The more I worked with consumer packaging materials, the more time I had to dwell of the unseen aspects of the material circulations in contemporary society.

Figure 93 Julie-Anne Milinski *Jardinière* in crate 2014

Jardinière propelled its botanical specimen skyward on a pedestal of consumer packaging, simultaneously an un-monument to consumerism and a monument to the female gardener. Situating the plant growing out of a tower that contained botanical references connected issues of material and subject. The *Jardinière* also reinstated the plant to an elevated position—as it would be seen in tropical forests—from underneath. The discussion surrounding this work was firmly around consumer packaging, with viewers noting recognisable elements in the stand. The combination

of materials also prompted conversation about packaging that eventually ends up in the wider environment, and new material realities, like plastiglomerates, where organic and synthetic transmogrify. Again, viewers were concerned that the *Monstera* plant would survive for the eight-week duration of the exhibition, which it did, growing noticeably during that time.

Later in 2014, when I had the opportunity view the works of Judy Pfaff and Adrián Villar Rojas in New York, I reflected on both the construction and conceptual aspects of *Jardinière* at length. I felt a synergy with these artists' responses to the increasing hybridised urban environment, where the organic and the synthetic did not sit neatly contained side by side but rather seeped, oozed, mingled, and joined. This was to influence my final studio outcomes, as was the residency in Philadelphia.

Figure 94 Julie-Anne Milinski *Jardinière* 2014

Transplanted: Philadelphia Residency, Crane Arts Centre, 2014

From 24 October to 15 November 2014, I participated in a collaborative studio residency at Crane Arts in Philadelphia, instigated by my supervisor Associate Professor Debra Porch, along with two fellow doctoral candidates Sonya Peters and Caity Reynolds (figure 95). As described by Porch in our successful Griffith University Collaborative Research Grant application, the project focused on the research question "How can the unpredictable and unknown occurrences of site/place be heightened through collaborative observation and the immediacy of the 'everyday' experience through what is visible and invisible?"[267]

Figure 95 Caity Reynolds, Sonya Peters and Debra Porch, studio at Crane Old School, Philadelphia 2014

The focus of our collaborative residency was on the everyday, and involved the key methodology of walking as a means to "assist and stimulate observation and perception", which was aligned with my PhD research project's methodology and

[267] Debra Porch, Griffith University Arts Education and Law Group Collaborative Research Project Grant Application Form, 2014.

focus. The residency provided an opportunity to work alongside three artists with unique practices and approaches, something I believe both refreshed and expanded my existing research strategies. During our month-long residency, we shared a studio at Crane Arts Old School and held an exhibition of new work produced titled *The Unpredictable Conceptions in Transdisciplinary Collaboration* at the Crane Arts Center.

It was immediately apparent that our differing research focuses would impact on our time spent walking through Philadelphia, and one of my earliest observations was how trained our individual eyes had become in seeking out specific subjects that were key to our individual research in our new environment. The discussions we had on these walks, while stopping to wait for each other as we photographed our individual fascinations, opened me up to the city through multiple sets of eyes, multiple minds, and multiple experiences. We became attuned to each other's interests and would alert one another to those aspects of city we thought may be of significance. From exploring Philadelphia's art museums to wandering the aisles of the Superfresh Supermarket, our daily group excursions revealed the city from multiple viewpoints that intersected, overlapped, and sometimes nudged our trained gaze ever so slightly off its well-worn path into the less-frequented zone of the periphery.

Philadelphia is a city undergoing substantial gentrification in areas just outside the old central city. Northern Liberties, according to the hosts in of our various accommodations, is an area undergoing tremendous change and has been for the last ten years. There were many new residential developments being constructed during our stay and, with a large number of restaurants, bars and retail stores in the area, the general feel of the neighbourhood was one of vibrancy. Further north towards the Crane Arts Galleries and Crane Old School Studios, there was more vacant land, but it is not hard to imagine that in another ten years, the streets north of North Girard will be unrecognisable. Our accommodation was situated at three locations approximately ten minutes apart, and from there approximately ten minutes to the studio at Crane Old School.

Figure 96 Road works outside Crane Old School Studios, Philadelphia 2014

The new developments under construction are built all the way to the street, as are the traditional row houses in Philadelphia. It was not uncommon to have to walk on the road to get around a construction site. Flagging tape was a ubiquitous presence (figure 96), marking hazards, delineating boundaries, and steering pedestrians on a safe course. I decided to employ it in my work because it was so prevalent in the urban environment and was a familiar material. Due to the lack of yard-space, another common feature in the neighbourhood were window boxes and potted plants at the front of houses. These small-scale gardens, no matter how humble, were evidence of biophilic tendencies in the gritty, urban environment (figure 97).

Figure 97 Potted plants next to Freeway, Philadelphia 2014

NYC / Philadelphia perambulatory harness proposition— (come together fall apart, come together again fall apart again), 2014

> On Monday 27th October 2014, the four of us caught the bus from Philadelphia to Manhattan. Walking from Chinatown to the Larchmont Hotel, wrong turns were taken. Blood sugar plummeted. Bladders filled. Tempers frayed. Energy levels varied. As we stopped in various couplings on street corners, checking maps, scanning crowds for familiar faces, we disconnected and reconnected. We separated and joined. We lost patience. Found our bearings. This was to be our perambulatory pattern in NYC, and in Philadelphia for the weeks that followed.
>
> — Julie-Anne Milinski, journal entry, 7 November 2014

Our walking methodology was to be the focus of the work I made and exhibited during the residency. As we walked around the city as a group, we were constantly stopping and starting—to take photographs, to look at street signs, to venture into shops. We were content to wander and would drift into various combinations of 1+1+1+1, 2+1+1, 2+2 and 3+1. Trying to 'stick together' on a single path proved futile, and the words of Buddhist nun and author Pema Chödrön came to mind,

> We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.[268]

I was interested in how we kept coming together and making connections based on what we wanted to look at, how well we felt (we all suffered from a cold at various stages), then disconnecting to rest and recuperate. In both Philadelphia and New York, this pattern of coming together and parting repeated again and again in various combinations. I decided to make a work that spoke of the experience of our walking together and separately, and to use a material I was familiar with which was also prevalent in the streets of Northern Liberties. This approach sought to focus on human and material circulations through the city.

Figure 98 Walking rope

Improvising on the idea of a walking rope used to keep groups of children together when on walking excursions (figure 98), I made a work that gave each of us an autonomous harness that could be worn over the head and one shoulder or pulled down to sit on the waist. Three harnesses had a lead with a connector that the wearer could choose to connect to or disconnect from another harness (figure 99 and 101). Crocheted from flagging tape, the leads were made from tape with text containing the warning “LEAD HAZARD” (figure 100). The longest lead was exhibited with the tape unaltered to allow the text to be read. The homonym *lead* in the case of the work

[268] Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heartfelt Advice for Hard Times* (London: Element, 2005), 14.

advised of the hazards of leading which became apparent during excursions where we lost our bearings.

Figure 99 Julie-Anne Milinski *NYC / Philadelphia perambulatory harness proposition (come together fall apart, come together again fall apart again)* 2014

Figure 100 Julie-Anne Milinski, *NYC / Philadelphia perambulatory harness proposition (come together fall apart, come together again fall apart again)* (detail) 2014

The works were installed on the wall pinned at hip height, and immediately viewers saw the connection of the works to the body (figure 101). However, one of the harnesses sat on the floor without a lead, offering the potential reading as being disconnected, or alternatively whole and open to potential connections.

Figure 101 Julie-Anne Milinski, *NYC / Philadelphia perambulatory harness proposition (come together fall apart, come together again fall apart again)* (detail) 2014

Figure 102 Julie-Anne Milinski *Top loader* 2014

The duration of the residency necessitated an optimum way of working that I now realise brought a spontaneity to my work. I was able to utilise familiar techniques and materials to work with the ideas generated from my new environment. For example, I found a roll of black plastic packaging in the gallery that was left over from a QCA Design exhibition shipped from Brisbane. In the spirit of collaboration proposed by our residency, I decided to use the plastic as a material collaboration with whoever had rolled the plastic into a coil. I unrolled the plastic then re-enacted this gesture in a more sculptural structure. Three stickers on the plastic indicated that the packaging had contained work that was 'top load only'; this text gave the work its title, *Top loader* (figure 102). I crocheted a long chain, which was wound into an oblong coil that emerged from the top loader. The resulting work sits in an odd dialogue with one of the harnesses, a remnant shell (husk) that protected a previous work in the space now embellished and participating in a new way as part of the work itself. Recognising the

discarded packaging as something with potential and a possible vibrant addition to my work is in keeping with Bennett's plea for us to consider the "material powers" circulating around human bodies and to be "more attentive encounters between people materialities and thing materialities".[269] Its placement with the harness brings it into circulation with the (absent) human body.

Figure 103 Julie-Anne Milinski and unknown workers *Cautionary tails* 2014

A play on language was employed in *Cautionary tails* (figure 103). I collected caution tape from several building sites where it had been tied in place. The resulting lengths frequently contained knots made by the workers who had tied tape onto the site I had torn them from. I took these lengths and, working with the existing knots, would crochet between them; my gesture thus joined the workers' gesture. The work's name

[269] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* ix–x.

was inspired in part by our recent experience of Halloween costumes and the suggestion that the work could be worn as a tail. Additionally, because of the frequent incident of crime in the neighbourhood, our hosts provided us with "cautionary tales" in the hope of making our visit safer, particularly given our long walks that passed through even less desirable neighbourhoods. More caution tape was presented escaping from the black plastic bag that was used in its liberation from a building site (figure 104). Sitting on the floor, the work engaged in a dialogue with a fire extinguisher, expanding the conundrum from "Is it rubbish?" to "Is the fire extinguisher a part of the work?" As Brian O'Doherty notes, the modern gallery's removal of all references to the outside world makes all such fixtures an aesthetic conundrum.[270]

Figure 104 Julie-Anne Milinski, *NYC / Philadelphia perambulatory harness proposition (come together fall apart, come together again fall apart again)* (detail) 2014

Much of the audience feedback related to our experience of Philadelphia and people's surprise that we had spent much of our time walking around the city. The notions of connectedness and disconnectedness were evident to viewers who related this not only the status quo of our working group, but also to new acquaintances with

[270] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, 2nd ed. (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

colleagues and host families, and the separation from home through geographical distance. While the work did not use botany as a leitmotif, it was successful in its utilisation of materials associated with the construction industry and familiar to the local audiences on the many local building sites. The physical strength of the crocheted works aroused a great deal of interest and prompted discussion of both the prevalence of plastic in all aspects of daily life and its potential life cycle in the environment.

Soft Tags for the City, 2014

The Philadelphia residency also facilitated a tangential work involving temporary gestures exploring ideas of circulation carried out during our city walks. On one of the first days in Philadelphia, I found a lime-green pipe cleaner in the gutter, which I took back to the studio. Within twenty-four hours, I had found another pipe cleaner, the same colour but in a different location. I imagined someone leaving them all over the city, but did not see any more so decided it had been purely coincidental. In one of our many forays into the $2 store, I bought a bag of pipe cleaners. I would carry them in my bag and occasionally make a leaf shape with one and connect it to a plant (figures 105–6). I associated this gesture with a very quick, botanical line drawing.

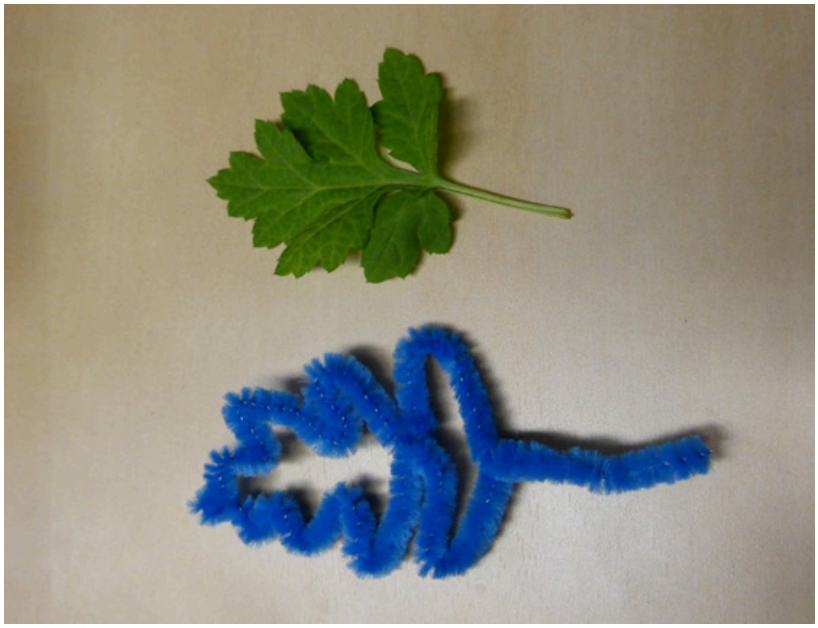

Figure 105 Studio experimentation, pipe cleaner leaves 2014

Figure 106 Julie-Anne Milinski *Soft tag: pipe cleaners* 2014

Rendering the pipe cleaners into accurate leaf shapes hindered the project, so I decided instead to leave a stylised initial, a 'soft tag'. My tagging was fluffy and easily removable and in my experience, the material of the tag (i.e., the pipe cleaner) was appealing, so I hoped that the tags would be removed by passers-by as I had done. I left a couple in paths I walked along daily, so that I could see if the tags were being removed. When I established that the pipe cleaners were being taken, I became more prolific in my output, confident that they were more than a flagrant act of littering.

Figure 107 Julie-Anne Milinski *Soft tag: pipe cleaners* 2014

The weather during our stay had been extremely mild, with daytime temperatures averaging between 12 and 20°C. On our last day in Philadelphia, the weather turned, and for the first time during the trip, I felt the icy bite of the wind permeate layers of clothing the instant that I went outdoors. The sky was a particular shade of grey that locals assured me was indicative of snow on the way. Rain and frost had affected the Halloween decorations; pumpkins slowly rotted and fake cobwebs became matted and sodden clumps in gutters. The plants in window boxes I had so admired when I first arrived had suffered the effects of cold, with their flowers and leaves blackening. Snow was visible on cars that had travelled in from outer lying areas, even though it had not snowed in the city centre.

Figure 108 Julie-Anne Milinski *Soft tag: rose petals* 2014

After I packed up my room on this last morning, I took a bouquet of wilted roses with me and I walked into the city centre with two of my companions. I asked one of the artists to take photographs as I scattered the rose-petals along a particularly bleak stretch of North 2nd Street from the intersection of Callowhill (figure 108). I was genuinely sad to leave Philadelphia, and saw this gesture as a parting declaration of my affection for this vibrant, gritty, urban environment. Even in their decaying state, the rose petals left a colourful trail, mingling with the stuff already on the street: rose petals, autumn leaves, litter, pipe cleaners. I thought of Bennett's evocative debris that

triggered her thinking about "thing-power": glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick.[271] Philadelphia had provided another rich site connected to the concerns of my research in the Magic Gardens (figure 109). The relevance of this site became evident in my final creative works.

The Philadelphia Magic Gardens

The Magic Gardens in Philadelphia is a mosaic public artwork created by Isaiah Zagar. Commenced in 1994 on a block of privately owned vacant land near the artist's studio, the work was completed over fourteen years, resulting in a network of mosaic-covered tunnels, grottos, and walls.[272] The work was at risk of being dismantled when the Boston-based landowner decided to sell the property; however, through community support, the site was saved and opened to the public in 2008.[273] Zagar's neighbourhood beautification efforts have not been restricted to this site, with mosaics being a prominent feature in the surrounding neighbourhood (figure 110).

Figure 109 *Philadelphia Magic Gardens* Philadelphia 2014

[271] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.
[272] Philadelphia Magic Gardens, "About Philadelphia's Magic Gardens," accessed 3 March 2015,http://www.phillymagicgardens.org/about-us/.
[273] Ibid.

I visited the Magic Gardens on a cold, overcast day, and the weather amplified the bleakness of the South Street precinct. The gardens are a labyrinth of stairs and doorways, with every surface encrusted with broken crockery, bottles, bicycle wheels, toilet bowls, and other assorted, discarded objects, mortared together to create a vibrant, colourful oasis. Zagar's heroic display of kitsch enlivens the disparate materials so that they appear to grow in arrangements that bombard the eyes. While initially the Magic Gardens appears to be visually overwhelming and bordering on chaotic, closer inspection reveals the painstaking care that has been taken in arranging the fragments (figure 111).

Figure 110 Isaiah Zagar in mosaic-covered laneway off South Street, Philadelphia 2014

The Magic Gardens brought to mind my construction of the *Jardinière*, and the processes of cutting and attaching the collected packaging materials to form a surface over the structural framework. The Magic Gardens seem to exemplify the "kind of urban vegetation . . . like the strange, mutant flora . . . where the natural and

the artificial slowly come to resemble one another" that Gioni speaks of in relation to contemporary sculpture.[274] Zagar has taken the flotsam and jetsam of the city and planted them in mortar, where they appear to have grown from, organically over time, retaining a sense of the materials' vitality. For example, the shattered shards of ceramic and glass reveal their brittleness in sharp angles, and the rust on bicycle wheels is evidence of the metal's oxidation—its activity despite its fixed location. I also found the experience of walking through the grottos and spaces of the Magic Gardens like looking at an archaeological excavation site, with layers of anthropogenic markers revealing our history of consumerism through the evidence of our discarded objects. Zagar's Philadelphia Gardens parallels my project's tactic of using botany as a leitmotif in creative works to infer material vitality, and is an extreme example of an urban garden in contemporary consumer society.

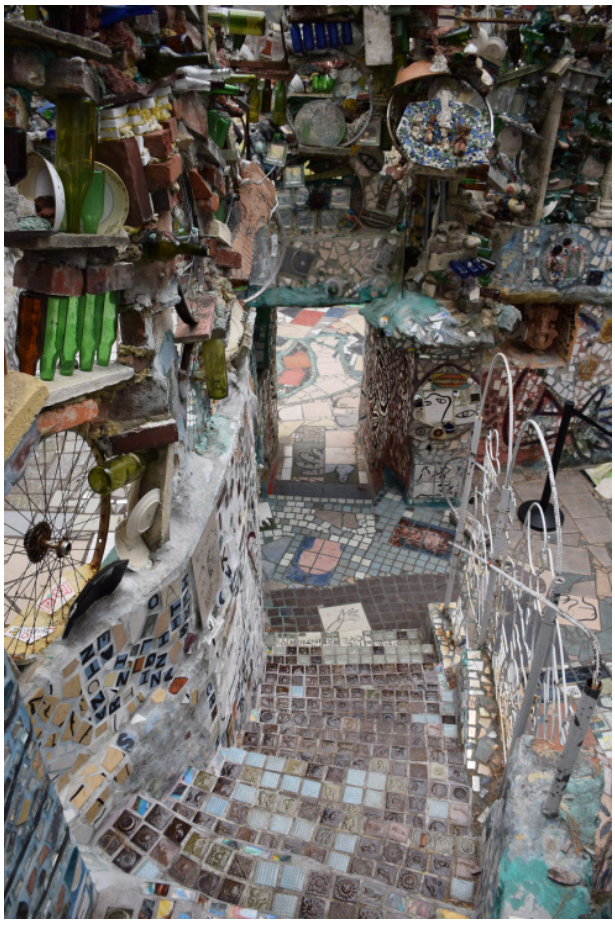

Figure 111 *Philadelphia Magic Gardens* (stairway) 2014

[274] Massimiliano Gioni, "Ask the Dust," 65–66.

PlastiCity and *PlastiScenery (not-so-still-lives),* 2015–16

PlastiCity and *PlastiScenery (not-so-still-lives)* (2015–16, figure 112) align and explore the themes of this PhD research—namely, botany, the urban environment, and consumer packaging, including its ongoing, material liveliness in the environment after its single, domestic use. A contemporary interpretation of traditional artistic genres of nature representation, landscape and still life, the towering forms and obscured views in *PlastiCity* are derived from my visual experiences of the city centre, while *PlastiScenery (not-so-still-lives)* focuses on more domestic and suburban observations. Ruminations on the Philadelphia Magic Gardens, with its fragments of glass and ceramics embedded in concrete, contributed to thoughts on material and compositional approaches. Also pivotal in arriving at this work has been the studio environment, where I have surrounded myself with plant cuttings in jars filled with water and containers of soil. My prolonged observations of these plants, noticing the emergence of new growth and of roots as they form, has caused me to consider life support systems usually hidden from view by earth.

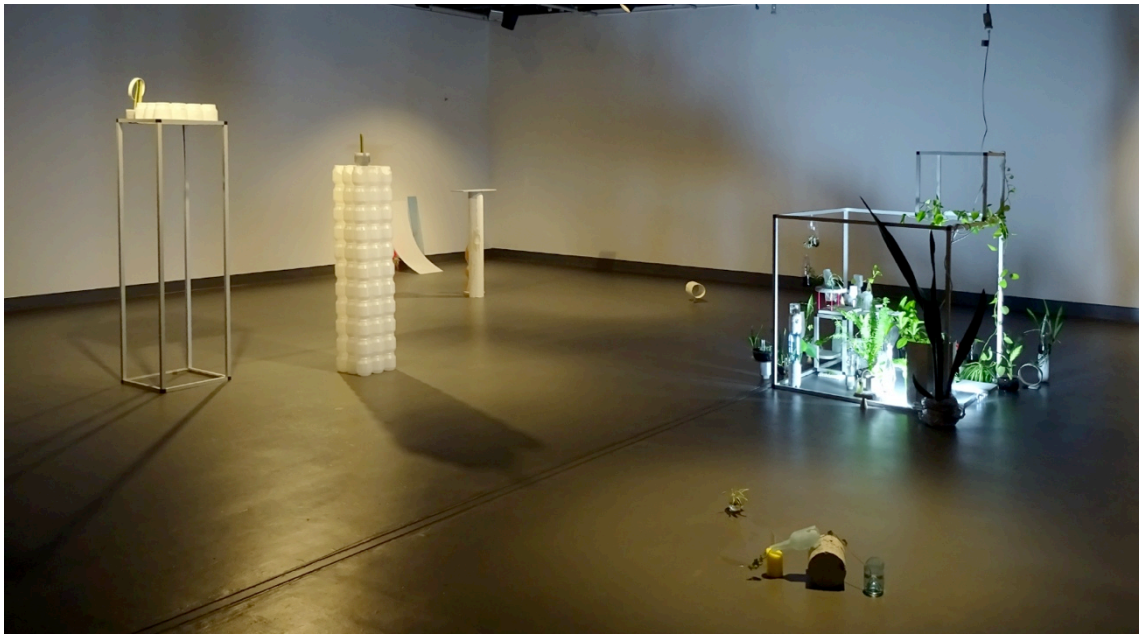

Figure 112 Julie-Anne Milinski *PlastiCity* and *PlastiScenery* (*not-so-still-lives)* (trial installation) 2016

Concrete and glass are materials frequently associated with the city, which is sometimes referred to as a concrete jungle, and the combination of these materials has a distinctly urban aesthetic. Considering approaches I could take with these

materials, neither of which I had used previously, I began studio experimentations that would assist me in coming to understand their properties and the knowledge that comes from extensive handling. Concrete also holds autobiographical relevance; prior to his retirement, my father drove a concrete truck. I have childhood memories of going with him to the concrete plant and climbing on the mountains of sand and gravel that would be mixed with cement in the back of the trucks. I am certain that my father viewed concrete as the great liberator from lawn-mowing, and over the years, the lawn-to-concrete ratio of our yard was reduced through the addition of a number of concrete patios. These memories of concrete as a means of supressing nature were embedded early, and often resurface when I see new homes being built in my neighbourhood, with most of the block being covered by the concrete slab that the house is being built upon. Referencing both the house slab and the domestic environment, I cast concrete supports in square and rectangular forms in cake tins. Some concrete objects have been cast in plastic and glass containers, forming their shape and sometimes imprinting them with Plastics Identification Codes.[275] These imprinted inscriptions reminded me of the concrete slabs that cover access holes to subterranean telecommunications and power services in suburban streets.

My collection of glass packaging includes jars from Philadelphia, Singapore, and France. Although some of these jars are simple, they were chosen for the way they captured and held my attention. For example, I was drawn to small, delicate jars, which once contained yogurt, imported from France into Singapore, which I then carried to Australia. These deliberations of material-circulations had become more frequent after my Philadelphia residency and the observations made through my work *Soft tags* (2014). I came to appreciate the substance of glass through the process of sandblasting, which eroded the shiny surface, rendering it opaque and eventually creating holes in the vessel. This experience altered my understanding of glass from being a molten liquid that could be formed into whole, fragile objects, to individual, moveable particles (figure 113). I liken the experience of holding a glass vessel in front of the high-pressure stream of water and silica in the sanding booth to holding a block of ice under a water tap, the once solid shape slowly dissolving at the point of where liquid and solid make contact. In comparison, plastic containers do not yield as easily

[275] The Plastics and Chemical Industries Association, "Plastics Identification Code," accessed 24 December 2015, http://www.pacia.org.au/Content/PIC.aspx.

to the abrasive process and are far more resilient. The sandblasting also had the curious effect of estranging the glass as a recognisable material. The sandblasted vessels were mistaken as something I had cast, with the eroded surfaces' indentations being construed as finger-prints. Rather than being identical, machine made objects, sandblasting gave each vessel a unique identity.

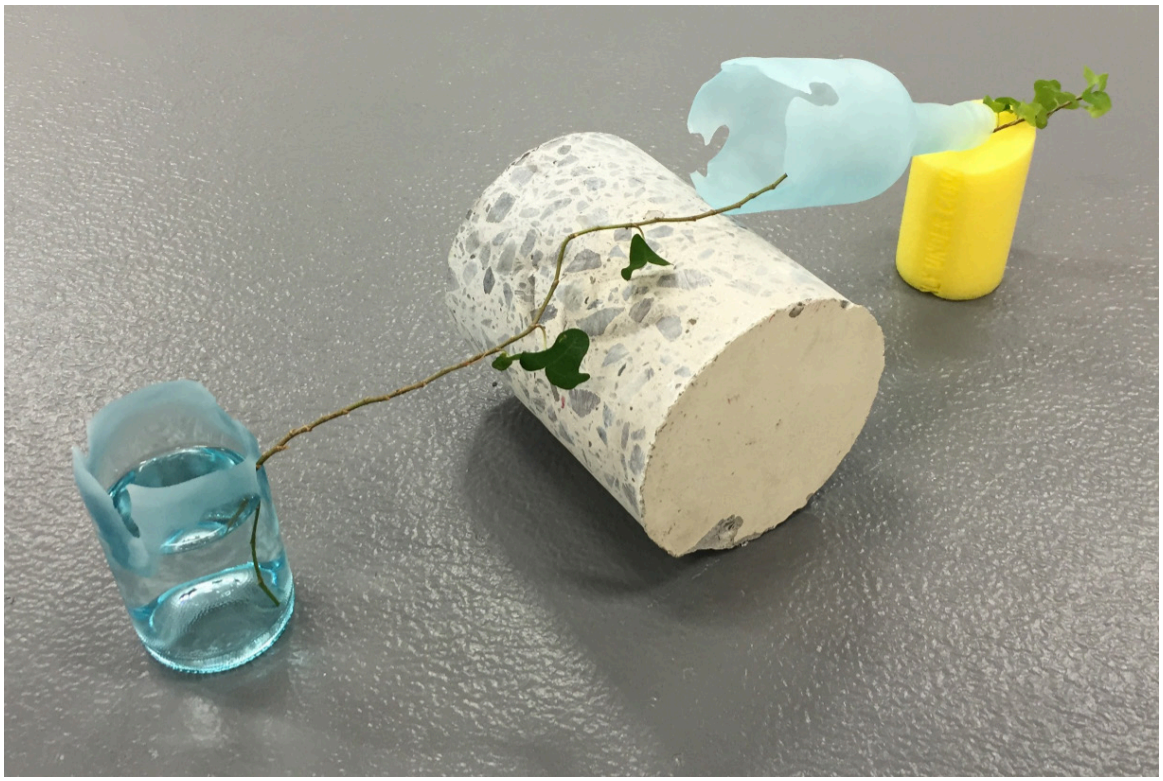

Figure 113 Julie-Anne Milinski *PlastiScenery (not-so-still-lives)* (detail) 2016

I imagined the time spent sandblasting the glass and plastic as a way of 'fast-forwarding' what might happen to the materials in an outdoor environment; the sandblasted objects worn appearance is similar to glass and plastic washed up on a beach, eroded by the natural forces of the ocean. As the bottles and jars I had sandblasted were brought into the studio and placed on shelves among the plants, vignettes began to appear to me through the sandblasted holes. These glimpses reminded me of how botany is sometimes experienced in the city—framed by architecture, sometimes through glass, and only partially visible.

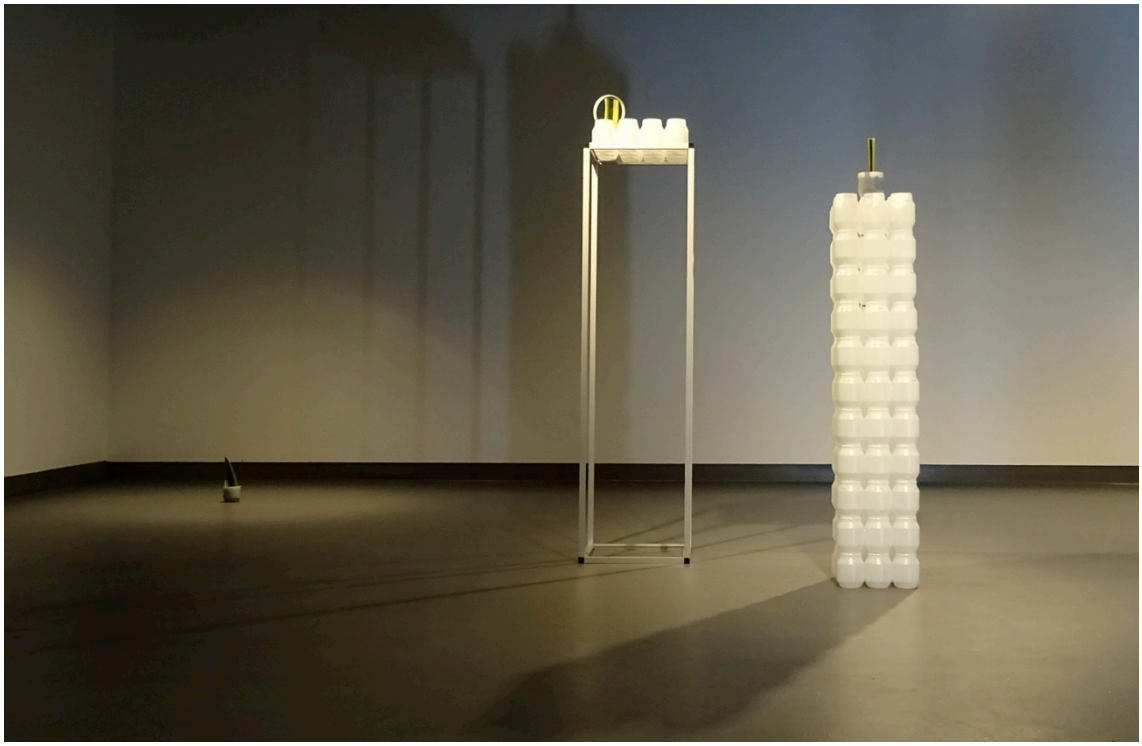

Figure 114 Julie-Anne Milinski *PlastiCity* (trial installation) 2016

A prominent presence in the work is a large number of plastic tubs that once contained yoghurt (figure 114). The physical quality of these particular containers that led me to collect them is their solidity; they seem more like multi-use storage containers (similar to Tupperware) than temporary packaging. After attempting to sandblast a hole through one of the tubs, their durability was confirmed and a sustained effort, significantly more than would be required to make a hole in very thick glass, barely penetrated the plastic. Hawkins notes the potential for new ways of thinking that might arise from the physical handling involved in recycling where rubbish requires further consideration to be sorted. She says,

> This doesn't necessarily make us think about how most of the waste we make comes from exploited labour and goes to an exploited nature. But it does entangle us in new relations and bodily practices that could be the first small step towards a more radical ethics of waste that is based on corporeal generosity rather than just "doing the right thing".[276]

Interestingly to my project, the terminology used in the process of making yoghurt includes both nature (flora) and culture: living 'cultures' containing the bacteria lactobacillus when ingested, sustain intestinal 'flora'. It was curious to note how the

[276] Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 115.

modular tower of monotonous yoghurt tubs seemed to emphasise my consumption. Upon viewing this arrangement, a number of people have exclaimed that I eat a lot of yoghurt, recognising the packaging and finding the number of units confronting. Innate consumer guilt seems to compel me to draw attention to the expiration dates on the tubs as testimony to the four years that I have been collecting the tubs. This arresting of flows of circulation through collecting rather than disposing or recycling again proved a useful provocation for discussions surrounding consumer culture.

Figure 115. Julie-Anne Milinski *PlastiCity* (detail) 2016

There are three organic references in *PlastiCity*. The first is botanical, a single leaf from a *Sansevieria trifasciata* 'Laurentii', which is cut into thirds and planted in three containers situated on the two towers and on the floor (figures 114 and 115). As a botanical monoculture, the plant's ability to enhance its environment is limited, re-enforcing the monotony of the environment it inhabits. The plant is rendered into an architectural form in the frame-tower, supporting a section of PVC pipe. On the floor, closer inspection reveals that the cut leaf has produced an offspring. However, the plant's bright lime-green border is lost in propagation, further diminishing its visual impact (figure 115). The second botanical specimen is a spider plant, *Chlorophytum comosum*, emerging from a sandblasted plastic bottle, partially visible in the same way botany is framed or obscured by architecture in cities (figure 116). Third, a turned wooden totem with an anthropomorphic 'eye' formed from a knot in the wood, gazes

at the abraded surface of a length of PVC pipe, the sanded marks similar to woodgrain (figure 117).

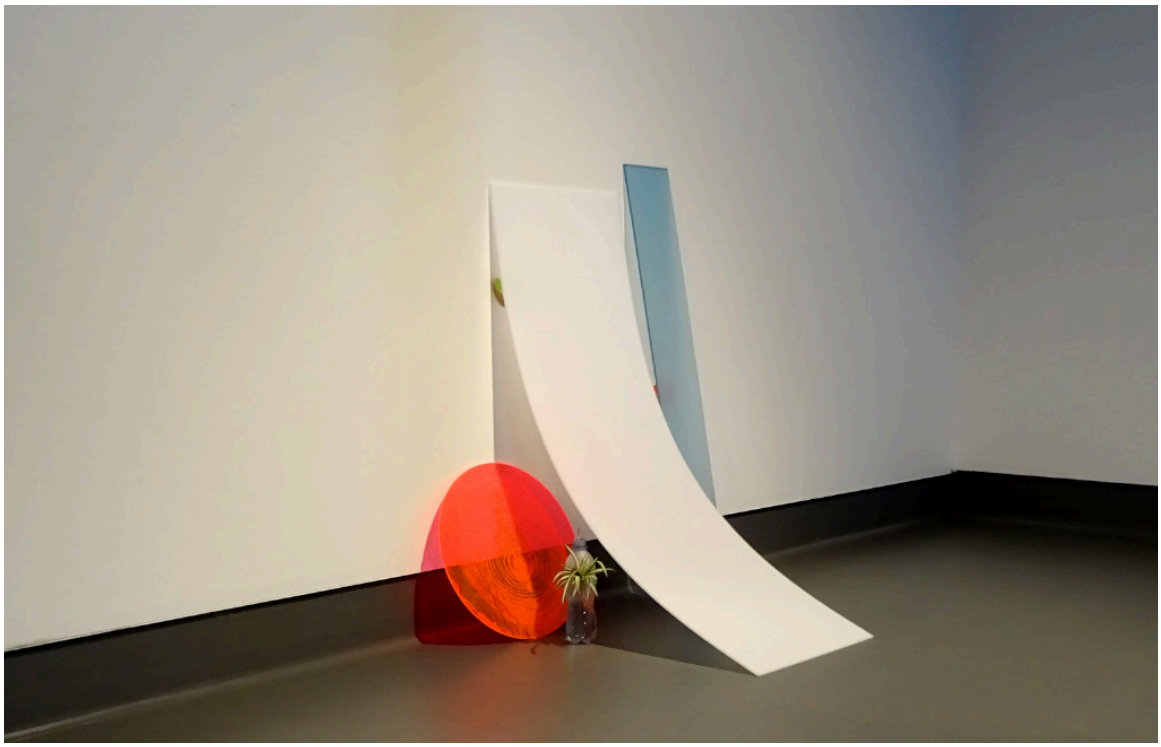

Figure 116. Julie-Anne Milinski *PlastiCity* (detail) 2016

I implicate myself as a physical presence in *PlastiCity* in the form of an aluminium tower (figure 114). In the same way that the city has shaped my views on nature, the constructed frame shapes my physical frame, registering both my altered height and my absence. The construction of this frame, the sensation of standing and fitting so neatly inside it and then stepping outside it brought back memories of X-rays and measurements and made me conscious of the space I occupied in the world.

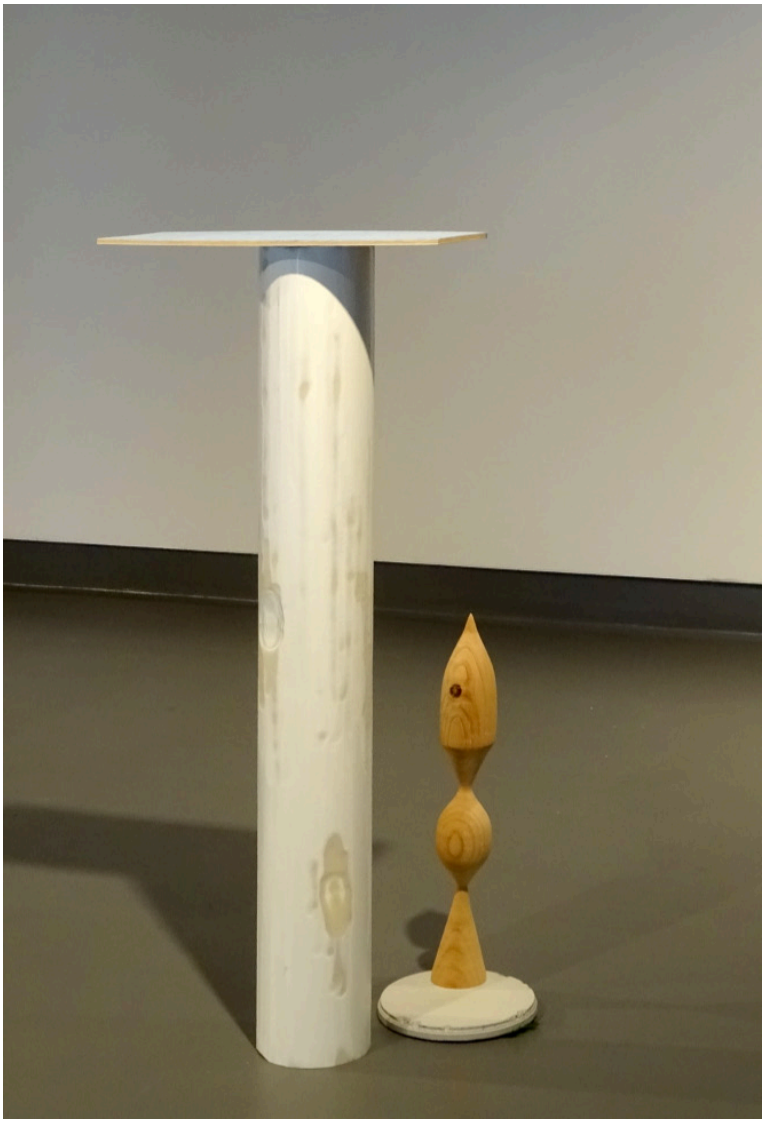

Figure 117. Julie-Anne Milinski *PlastiCity* (detail) 2016

PlastiScenery (not-so-still-lives) explores key themes of the research in a tableau of objects and specific plants identified by Wolverton in his guide *How to Grow Fresh Air*.[277] This ecosystem revels in the entanglements of plants and materials, drawing attention to precarious balances inspired by urban botanical environments (figure 118). Simultaneously, unseen exchanges are occurring as the toxic gasses emitted from materials within the arrangement and wider gallery environment (including plywood, plastic, adhesives, paint, and PVC pipe), are removed by the plants that absorb the airborne toxins and break them down through microbes that exist around

[277] Bill C. Wolverton, *How to Grow Fresh Air: 50 Houseplants That Purify Your Home or Office* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2008).

the plants roots.[278] As Wolverton notes, “to the human eye, plants may appear static and non-reactive as they continue their normal processes of living and growing. But in scientific terms, plants are highly dynamic”.[279]

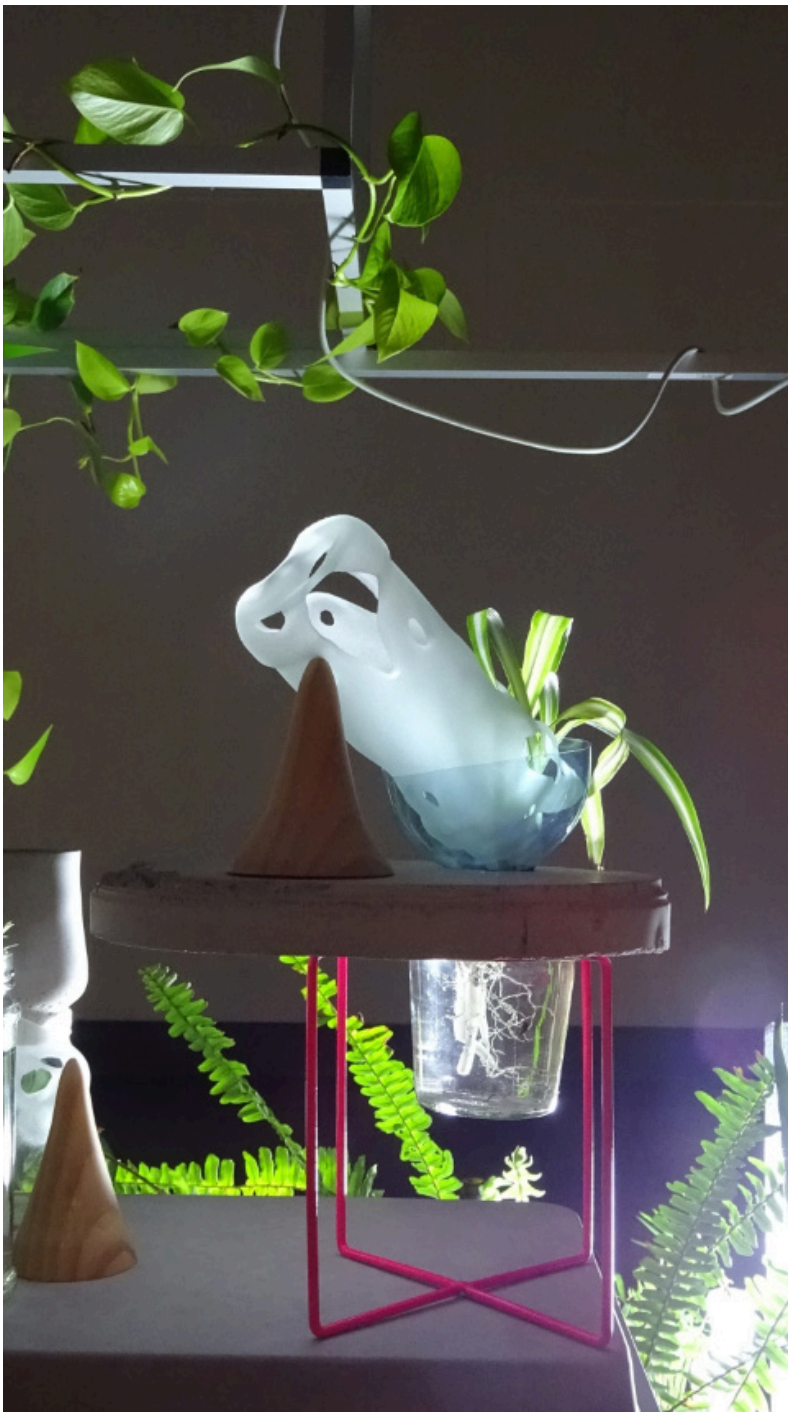

Figure 118 Julie-Anne Milinski *PlastiScenery (not-so-still-lives)* (detail) 2016

[278] Ibid., 25.
[279] Ibid., 15.

As seen in this chapter, the creative works produced for “Botanical within the Built: Visual Art and Urban Botany” manifest my art practice’s focus on human interaction with plants in urban habitats. Arising from a continuous reflexive dialogue with the theoretic research conducted in parallel to the studio project, the works use botany as a metonym for the larger natural world. The inclusion of botany and the utilisation and transformation of consumer packaging materials, known to be environmentally detrimental, speaks to my aim of revealing the liveliness of things other than human in our shared habitat. The studio research represents the hybridity of the natural urban environment, and the reciprocities and interdependence of its inhabitants.

Conclusion

As seen in many Western cities, the urban density of Brisbane is increasing in both the CBD and the surrounding suburbs. Indicative of this trend, the view from my home's front veranda has changed dramatically in the time that it has taken me to complete this project. Three houses have been demolished, the blocks of land split in half, and now three new houses sit beside three vacant blocks of land, awaiting construction. Most days, my writing has been accompanied by the soundscape of this development—earthmoving equipment, trucks delivering concrete and building materials, nail guns, power saws, drills, and the voices of tradespeople. Similarly, time spent at my QCA studio has been filled with these familiar sounds, as the twenty-one-level 'Southpoint' development is erected on the opposite side of Grey Street; a constant reminder of the city's expansion. I have gradually moved the plants growing in my studio from one side of the space to the other to catch the remaining light, as the new building casts its growing shadow across the QCA campus. Across the river, the CBD skyline has been in a constant state of flux as new buildings rise slowly to ever increasing heights. Construction of the city's tallest residential apartment building, the eighty-nine-storey Brisbane 'Skytower' began in 2015. In 2016, the way we live in Brisbane is changing, and becoming more like other large cities where high-density living is the norm.

The aspect of this change that is important to me is how we cultivate and fulfil our biophilic desires the twenty-first-century city. In this exegesis, I have focused on how investigating the unremarkable botany within the built environment of the city enriches conceptions of nature through proximity and our everyday, mundane encounters with plants. I have argued and established that the use of botany as a leitmotif in artworks can stimulate ideas relating to the larger natural environment. Additionally, the inclusion of materials associated with contemporary consumer culture that have been transformed to reveal dormant aspects of their materiality can activate connections between humans and the living and non-living things that reside in the urban environment.

In Chapter 1, I considered how personal perceptions of nature were shaped through my personal history of growing up in a country town and moving to a city as an adult.

In addition to this geographical shift, my fascination with dichotomies of nature and artifice was explained through my experience of having my growth halted through medical treatment, an intervention that raised my awareness of my natural, biological state being subjected to cultural expectations that could be realised through science.

Humans' desire to affiliate with nature was explored through Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis, and I discussed how our urban environment shapes our preferences for natural environments. I argued the relevance of developing an aesthetic appreciation for the hybrid city where built and botanical environments overlap, given that this environment is where more than half the world's population reside and interact with nature.

Drawing on research by Bennett, Hawkins, and Whatmore, I established the liveliness of other inhabitants of the city, both living and non-living. I determined the vitality of plants, supporting my decision to use botany as a metonym for the wider natural world. Similarly, by establishing that non-living materials possess a liveliness, as Bennett theorises, the full extent of their presence in an environment was expanded.

In Chapter 2, I interrogated the visual methodologies used to explore themes related to my enquiry by selected contemporary artists, ascertaining the effectiveness of various materials in commenting on the natural environment. The use of consumer packaging was noted as prevalent in contemporary art and not without risks, as the materials bear inherent negative associations with environmental degradation. I established the need to conceptually and materially refine artworks to avoid the audience alienation that can arise when artworks are construed as accusatory. Material transformations that engage the audience were concluded to be a more effective way of engendering interest in the concepts explored in the research; namely, botany in the built environment, with a focus on contemporary society.

A more detailed analysis of my studio activity in Chapter 3 argued for the effectiveness of my chosen methodologies—walking, collecting, crocheting and botanical drawing. I identified the way that these methodologies facilitated specific experiences that enhanced and directed my research. Through walking, I was able to perceive the city and suburbs in a way that validated the theoretical research on the

effects of botany on microclimates. I cultivated an aesthetic appreciation of the nuanced presence of urban botany through time spent wandering in a variety of locations. Collecting disrupted the flow of consumer packaging through my own household, forcing a confrontation with the physical presence of the disposable 'stuff' of everyday life. The collection of plants in the studio both enhanced the environment and introduced into my periphery the constant activity of botany—growing, living, dying, and decaying. The most mundane of plants revealed their magical ability to propagate from a single leaf. Through crocheting and the prolonged handling involved, I came to know the materiality of plastic bags in a way never envisaged through normal, every-day use where the contact would be fleeting.

This material knowledge led me to other forms of extended manual handling, such as cutting and sandblasting, which in turn led to visual and theoretical discoveries inconceivable without this studio experimentation. Botanical drawing required me to fine tune my visual analysis of botany and turned my gaze to the microcosm. Because plant specimens physically altered in the time it took to draw them, my assertion of botany's agency was again confirmed. Again, the time demanded by the methodology allowed for contemplation of the physical subjects of my enquiry that would probably not have occurred through any other instance. This focus on the characteristics of plants' structures directly influenced the way in which I constructed and installed artworks.

Chapter 4 presented the artworks produced during this project as evidence of the knowledge I have acquired through the theoretical and visual research, and tested and refined using the stated methodologies. The effectiveness of using botany in artworks to explore issues of the wider natural environment was demonstrated in *Wilhelmina Szeretlek!* (2012–13), *Geniculum* (2013), *Jardinière* (2014), *PlastiCity* and *PlastiScenery* (*not-so-still lives*) (2015–16). The transformation of materials associated with consumer culture was crucial in these works, as well as in *re-inventing eden (scenario #7) – revisions and emergents* (2012), *A virescent series of things, connected or following in succession* (2012), and *NYC / Philadelphia perambulatory harness proposition (come together fall apart, come together again fall apart again)* (2014). Bringing to light these material properties that might otherwise go unnoticed and linking them with notions of botanical growth reinforced the ongoing vitality of consumer packaging when it is

discarded from the domestic environment to the wider environment as either litter or land-fill.

The exegesis and the artworks produced in this speculative research confirm the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans and their constructed habitat and the nature that shares the environment. The role of visual art has been shown to enrich ways of considering the natural environment in contemporary urban society through the vibrancy of things, living and otherwise.

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