

STORYTELLING, IDENTITY, AND SENSE OF PLACE

I don't see colour – Salote Tawale
Love In Bright Landscapes

30 June – 11 October

CREATIVE LEARNING AT PICA

This education kit focuses on themes of identity and sense of place by looking at storytelling in contemporary art. It has been created to assist students' engagement with the exhibitions at PICA in July-October 2021:

I don't see colour by Salote Tawale.

Love in Bright Landscapes guest curated by Annika Kristensen.

Housed in a heritage building in the heart of Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia, PICA is the city's focal point for the best Australian and international contemporary art and performance.

At PICA we recognise that we're situated on the lands of the Whadjuk people of the Nyoongar nation and pay respect to traditional custodians of this Country. We pay respect to all First Nations people, their cultures and connection to land, waters, community and the arts.

This education kit is targeted at teachers and students in years 7 to 12, and focuses on ways to experience, understand and make contemporary art. This can develop visual language, critical thinking, and creative problem solving.

Links to the Western Australian Curriculum are noted for teachers. The exhibitions demonstrate cross-curriculum priorities of sustainability and connection to country/place. They can also provide thought-provoking experiences for students which illustrate syllabus topics of identity, and commentaries.

Activities have been created to deepen student engagement with these themes. These provide hands-on paths of enquiry that teachers can adapt to the needs of their classes.

Art Analysis:

Questions about Contemporary Art

What do your senses tell you about the artwork?

Describe what you can see, hear, smell or touch (if the work can be interacted with).

What clues can you find about the meaning?

Describe the use of materials, colour, form, scale, repetition, variation, sound, symbols, or metaphors.

How do you think the artist has been influenced by their surroundings or context?

Consider how the artist responded to culture, history, politics, social movements, or environmental conditions.

How does the artwork make you feel?

Explain why it makes you feel this way.

What do you think the artist is trying to say?

KEY THEMES

PLACE, IDENTITY & STORYTELLING

People's identities are tied to the places they inhabit, and the objects within them. ¹ Sense of place describes feelings of being an insider and having ancestral or cultural connections to 'home'. ²

Storytelling helps to develop a connection with our surroundings. Oral storytelling in indigenous cultures has seen place-specific knowledge passed down for thousands of years.

Stories not only entertain and inform, but inspire and unify by sharing cultural values and perspectives. They can be told orally, visually, in writing, or digitally. Digital storytelling uses technological tools and multimedia to enhance the story. ⁴ Contemporary art often involves digital storytelling to engage audiences, particularly in the creation of moving images and soundtracks.

The understanding of exactly what a 'story' is varies. Stories can be understood as forms of knowledge. They can also be personal recollections, dominant cultural narratives, or collections of memories, practices, and materials. ⁵

Stories can express deeply personal experiences while simultaneously reflecting the broader social and political context. Sociologist Francesca Polletta ⁷ highlights the contradictions in stories as authentic yet manipulated; specific while revealing general processes; and reinforcing power structures yet being capable of transforming them. As such, stories speak of both truth and fiction.



1 Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, Robert Kaminoff, 'Place-identity: Physical world socialization of the self,' *Journal of environmental psychology* 3 (1983): 57-83.

2 Robert Hay, 'Sense of place in developmental context,' *Journal of environmental psychology* 18, no.1 (1998): 5-29.

3 Toby Butler, 'Memoryscape: How audio walks can deepen our sense of place by integrating art, oral history and cultural geography,' *Geography Compass* 1, no.3 (2007): 360-372.

4 Yee Bee Choo, Tina Abdullah and Abdullah Mohd Nawi, 'Digital Storytelling vs. Oral Storytelling: An Analysis of the Art of telling stories Now and Then,' *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 8, no. 5A (2020): 46-50.

5 Emilie Cameron, 'New geographies of story and storytelling,' *Progress in Human geography* 36, no. 5 (2012): 573-592.

6 Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling and Protest and Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Images: *Love In Bright Landscapes*, installation view, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), 2021. Photographer: Bo Wong.

KEY THEMES

PLACE, IDENTITY & POWER

Cultural understandings of the connections between identity and place can be reconsidered and challenged.

Decolonisation is a civil rights and social justice movement focused on returning Indigenous land and ways of life.⁷ It is a process of renegotiating power, and placing Indigenous people, knowledge and methods in a central role.⁸

Settler colonial states are places where Empires or Kingdoms founded colonies with the intention of replacing the original population with a new society of settlers. This includes Australia, Canada, the United States, and South Africa.

Australia was declared terra nullius (a Latin term meaning 'land of no one') and occupied by the British without a treaty with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As such, sovereignty was never ceded, and rights to the land were never given away.

Power and authority to govern still hasn't been returned to Indigenous people in most of these places. Academic Patrick Wolfe explains that colonisation is ongoing rather than historic: "invasion is a structure not an event".⁹

Decolonisation challenges settler perspectives and worldviews which have been privileged in Western societies, and which maintain unfair social structures. This is a process of 'decentering' settler perspectives by embracing diverse ways of being and knowing.

Traditional skills, handcraft and knowledge are often applied in contemporary art to de-centre settler perspectives. These techniques can open a space for dialogue between different generations and cultures about values and sustainability.¹⁰

Decolonisation builds more sustainable relationships between people and the natural environment.¹¹ Capitalism is viewed as a tool of the colonial project because land and natural resources are treated as commodities to be exploited and transported across the world.

Colonialism maintains unfair structures through political and economic strategies including segregation, imprisonment, and schooling. Decolonisation is concerned with how settler colonialism shapes the education system.

Art Interpretation:

Questions about decolonisation

How does the location and identity of an artist shape their perspective?

How do the stories we share place certain perspectives at the centre?

Whose voices are left at the margins?

Who is the ideal, imagined audience for the artwork?

How can art contribute to a more fair and just world?

⁷ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor,' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society* 1, no.1 (2012).

⁸ A. Sium, A., Chandni Desai, Eric J. Ritskes, 'Towards the "tangible unknown": Decolonization and the Indigenous future,' *Decolonization: indigeneity, education & society* 1, no. 1 (2012).

⁹ Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native' *Journal of genocide research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 310.

¹⁰ Elna Härkönen, Maria Huhmarniemi and Timo Jokela, 'Crafting sustainability: Handcraft in contemporary art and cultural sustainability in the Finnish Lapland,' *Sustainability* 10, no. 6 (2012): 1907.

¹¹ Val Plumwood, 'Decolonisation relationships with nature,' *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature* 2 (2002): 7-30.

I DON'T SEE COLOUR

The starting point for Salote Tawale's body of work was a conversation with a French student at a party in England, where he claimed "I don't see colour". The artist uses painting, installation and video to reflect on how this conversation about blindness to race and history relates to climate change.

In a world shaped by colonial and capitalist structures the impacts of climate change will be disproportionately experienced by people of colour. To deny seeing colour, denies people's lived reality of racial injustice. It also denies the responsibility to address one's position of privilege and contribute to solutions.¹²

In an expanded form of self-portraiture, Salote Tawale explores her experience as a woman from mixed Fijian and Anglo-Celtic heritage of displacement and being separated from land and traditional practices. She investigates cultural identity in ways that resist assumptions about Pacific Islanders living in Australia by refusing to engage in 'tribal clichés'.¹³ *I don't see colour* reflects the anxiety Salote experiences being from a place that is often overlooked which will tragically be among the first to be destroyed by climate change.

Larger-than-life paintings of heads like floating skulls are suspended from the ceiling in different skin tones. These portraits expose stereotypes with humour and a tone of tragi-comedy in response to the conversation which inspired the exhibition title.

The calico canvases are hung unstretched, suspended from the ceiling with rope attached to salvaged materials – corrugated iron, bamboo, cement blocks – similar to makeshift village shelters.



The scale and texture of the paintings are reminiscent of *masi*, ceremonial Fijian bark cloth (also known as tapa cloth), and depict the artist's feelings about loss and belonging. This connects to the village life of the artist's childhood in Fiji.

A structure made of salvaged materials creates a space where a video is shown, which is reminiscent of Fiji's built environment and the cultural spaces where people come together. These portable temporary buildings are important "*archives of cultural and familial knowledge, storehouses of unwritten memories, stories and histories*".¹⁴

¹² June Miskell, 'I don't see colour,' in Salote Tawale: *I don't see colour* (Perth: Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2021).

¹³ Ruth McDougall, 'A room of one's own: the art of Salote Tawale.' (Perth: Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2021).

¹⁴ 'I don't see colour,' in Salote Tawale: *I don't see colour* (Perth: Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2021).

Image: Salote Tawale, *I don't see colour*, installation view, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), 2021. Photographer: Bo Wong.

The video features the artist underwater struggling to keep her head above water yet adapting and responding to the conditions she faces. This is evocative of the conditions colonised peoples in the Pacific face.

The DIY construction and everyday materials could be interpreted as a reflection of the survivalism ideals of 'preppers' who prepare for crises and natural disasters. This may also be read as a reflection of the artist's family's preparedness to uproot and move from their home, and of the uncertain future shared by all of us in a rapidly changing climate. It is an unnerving exploration of what lies ahead. But rather than reinforcing the spectacle of disaster, it speaks of survival, resourcefulness, and creativity.

The walls and floors of the gallery space are covered with tessellated hatched patterns of green, grey and blue paint which reference woven pandanus mats. For Salote these cultural objects convey a sense of comfort and solace. The hatched pattern also conveys the sense of scattered light on the ocean: vast, powerful, healing...and rising.

Handmade Fijian artefacts and objects are viewed by the artist as a form of literature. They tell stories about colonial history but also of the present. Academic Teresia Teaiwa ¹⁵ argues that oral cultures, like those in the Pacific, pass stories down over thousands of years through not only word of mouth and music, but also through visual symbols and material culture. Stories can be found in weaving, carving, rock painting, markings on the human body, architecture, and within the landscape itself.

Salote Tawale shows us how stories can express deeply personal experiences while connecting to the broader social and political context. Her artwork de-centers whiteness from its privileged position in contemporary culture. She exposes stereotypes to create space for inclusive ways of knowing and being. This is achieved by exploring the complexities of identity, such as the conflict experienced by the artist being of mixed heritage and living on stolen land. She explains:

"My practice begins with embodiment. I'm looking at the values within a society that I participate in, so my body is really contingent in that, my race, ethnicity, and gender and how these dimensions are valued in Australian society." ¹⁶

Artmaking – Reflection:
Stories and perspectives influencing you

Revisit your visual art diary or portfolio and think critically about your visual influences and working processes.

Describe any pattern or trends you can identify.

What values or worldviews have informed your selection of artworks and artists as visual influences?

What cultures, lived experience or perspectives are reflected in your visual influences or working processes?

How do your assumptions and knowledge influence the way you interpret or make artwork?

¹⁵ Teresia Teaiwa, 'What remains to be seen: reclaiming the visual roots of pacific literature,' *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125, no.3 (2010): 730-736.

¹⁶ Eric Bridgeman and Salote Tawale, 'Embodying Becoming: Eric Bridgeman and Salote Tawale,' *Oceania Now* 1 (2014): 13-17.

LOVE IN BRIGHT LANDSCAPES

PICA guest curator Annika Kristensen explores the role of the artist in contributing to narratives which reflect the character of a city, time or place. *Love in Bright Landscapes* is about two west coast cities separated by thousands of kilometres but connected by landscapes stretched out beneath expansive bright skies: Perth and Los Angeles.

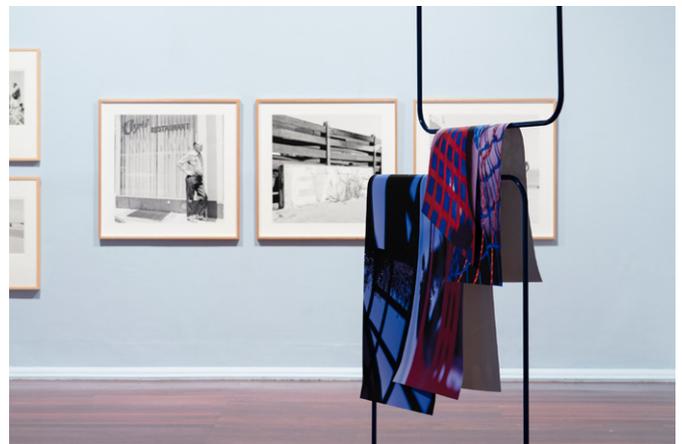
The following artists are featured: Carmen Argote; Jack Ball; Kevin Ballantine; Emma Buswell; George Egerton-Warburton; Teelah George; Cass Lynch; Laure Prouvost; Mei Swan Lim; Martine Syms; Ed Ruscha; Lisa Uhl; Brendan Van Hek; Sterling Wells.

The exhibition takes its title from the 1986 album by cult Perth band The Triffids – a group which contributed to city's narrative of wide-open roads, and long, hot, dry summers.

Despite their differences, Perth and Los Angeles share many features, such as: indigenous and colonial histories, natural resource booms, sprawling suburbia, car culture, blazing sunsets and steamy underbellies. They are frontier cities, bordered to the west by ocean, and separated from the east by desert and mountains.

Both cities have a sense of freedom and of being self-contained and isolated. Defined in opposition to larger, more established cities – as Los Angeles is to New York, and Perth is to Sydney or Melbourne – creates a sense of adolescence in these young cities, underpinned by long histories of First Nations people.

The Gabrielino/Tongva and Tataviam people in Los Angeles and Whadjuk Nyoongar people in Perth continue their strong connection to both cities. Los Angeles has the largest indigenous population of any city in the US when considering Pacific Islander and Latin American Diasporas.¹⁷



Images: *Love In Bright Landscapes*, installation view, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), 2021. Photographer: Bo Wong.

¹⁷ UCLA, 'Mapping Indigenous LA,' <https://mila.ss.ucla.edu/>

LISTEN: Dampland (2021) by Cass Lynch and Mei Swan Lim

Dampland is an audio work with accompanying imagery which explores Nyoongar oral storytelling and memories of place handed down over thousands of years. It's available to be listened to anytime and anywhere via the [Love In Bright Landscapes website](#) which can be accessed using the QR code below.

Dampland focuses on stories passed down through generations which reference the last ice age and rise in sea level that followed. Atmospheric sounds are used to reflect the changing environment, and natural cycles of cooling and warming described by Nyoongar ancestors. Listeners are taken on a journey through time, across the Darling Scarp, Swan Coastal Plain, to Wadjemup, or Rottnest.

Dampland is a collaboration between Nyoongar writer and researcher Cass Lynch and artist Mei Swan Lim. Lynch is interested in decolonialising perceptions of Nyoongar Country. Her writing explores narratives about geological features and structures of the earth through the lens of Nyoongar culture and Indigenous deep time. Mei Swan Lim is a sound designer and artist. Her work focuses on the importance of place, storytelling



18 Masakata Ogawa, 'Science education in a multisience perspective,' *Science education* 79, no. 5 (1995): 583-593.
19 ABC News, 'Research findings back up Aboriginal legend on origin of Central Australian palm trees,' 2015, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-03/aboriginal-legend-palm-tree-origin-central-australia-research/6369832?utm_campaign=news-article-share-control&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web
20 Toshiaki Kondo, Michael D. Crisp, Celeste Linde, David M. J. S. Bowman, Kensuke Kawamura, 'Not an ancient relic: the endemic *Livistona* palms of arid central Australia could have been introduced by humans,' *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 279, no. 1738, (2012): 2652-2661.

GLOSSARY

DEEP TIME refers to the vast time scale of the Earth's planetary history and geologic events. This is almost unimaginable compared to the time scale of human lives and experiences.

THE ANTHROPOCENE is a geological epoch which shows the effect of human behaviour. Epochs are long units of time during which a rock series is deposited. The Anthropocene explains the role of humans in causing planetary changes that are geologic, atmospheric and geomorphological.

INDIGENOUS SCIENCE - Every culture has its own science knowledge. Science involves solving problems and making the most of environmental circumstances by observing natural patterns, gathering evidence, experimenting and testing ideas. Indigenous science interprets how the local world works through a particular cultural perspective.¹⁸

TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Information about the natural environment can be passed down over very long periods of time, through oral storytelling, rituals and metaphors. Biologists and ecologists incorporate traditional ecological knowledge in Western science to understand natural patterns and cycles.

For example, recent DNA testing backs up Aboriginal legends. The red cabbage palm growing near Alice Springs was once thought to be a surviving relic of the rainforest past of Gondwana¹⁹ times. Ecological science suggests that the seeds were transported by humans over 1000kms, possibly 30,000 years ago.²⁰ This matches with traditional ecological knowledge of "gods from the north" transporting the seeds.

LISTEN: Dampland (2021) by Cass Lynch and Mei Swan Lim Continued

Dampland communicates Indigenous science and traditional ecological knowledge about natural cycles. Cass Lynch explains that Nyoongar Dreaming stories are located in the Nyitting or 'cold place', and that research suggests that stories of the 'cold times' and the angry sea that rose after it are actually eyewitness accounts climate changes.²¹ She goes on to tell of Nyoongar stories of the bilya, or river, once being 20 kilometres longer flowing west across country now underwater, and the island of Wadjemup as a thickly forested hill in a broad plain.

Dampland is warning that human behaviour is disrupting natural cycles through climate change. Country, as we know it, can't survive these changes. The vast time scales considered in *Dampland* and exploration of how human behaviour changes the land highlights that we are now living within the Anthropocene.



²¹ Cass Lynch, 'Dampland,' (Perth: Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2021)

<https://loveinbrightlandscapes.org.au/dampland/>

²² Australian Curriculum: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures/>

Curriculum links:

Connections to Country/Place²²

Contemporary art can reveal the ways people are connected physically and spiritually to Country/Place.

By providing a platform for First Nation voices, like Cass Lynch, and Salote Tawale, contemporary art can 'decentre' settler perspectives and:

- Illustrate deep knowledge traditions and holistic world views.
- Examine experiences through historical, social and political lenses.
- Highlight the strength, resilience, and diversity of First Nation communities against historic and contemporary impacts of colonisation.
- Help to build identity and strengthen relationships between people, culture and places.

This may assist students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of First Nations cultures.

Artmaking – Inquiry:
Storytelling about place

Talk to someone important to you about the places they are connected to. This could be where they are from, or where they call home. It could be where they feel most like their true self. Ask them if they have any special stories about this place. With their permission record these stories digitally or in writing.

Consider how these stories could be turned into an artwork. Think about the elements of storytelling, such as the:

- plot – what happens in the story.
- characters – such as heroes and villains.
- setting – where the story is taking place.
- conflict – obstacles the characters face.
- resolution – where everything works out.
- message – meaning of the story.

What images or materials could you use to visually communicate the story?

How would you use technological tools and multimedia to enhance the story?

How would you change the story to present it to an audience?

In what way does this personal story say something about the world more broadly?



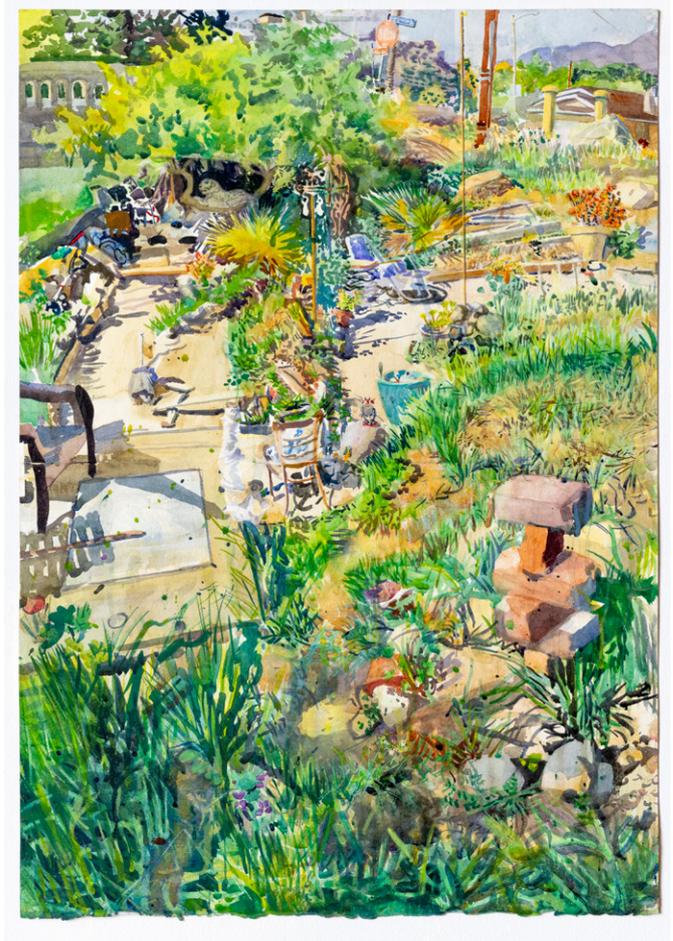
Images: Striling Wells, Cowboy site photo. Image courtesy the artist.

Cowboy's Estate (2021) by Sterling Wells

Sterling Wells completed his series of watercolour paintings in lengthy sessions outdoors during the pandemic. Focusing on spaces that are in-between and normally closed off to the public, such as freeway on-ramps and urban waterways, the artist has depicted a tension between humans and their environment. He portrays the temporary shelters and belongings of unhoused residents of Los Angeles who increasingly look to the margins and fringes for a place to live in the wake of the pandemic.²³

Although painted outdoors, his works differ from the Impressionist tradition of 'plein air'. Popularised in the late 1860s through work of Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Camille Pissarro this technique focused on capturing the fleeting effects of light on the colour of landscape at different times of day. Wells on the other hand documents changes within the landscape overtime, treating the surface of his paintings as a temporal record which accumulates marks and reveals elements of chance and randomness. He explains:

*"I have mixed feelings about using the term plein air painting. Plein air is an artistic genre that describes paintings that are made outside conventionally in one sitting, with the primary intention of capturing light and colour. My works do not fit these conventions because I work on each watercolour for many days in a row, and my primary intention is not to capture a specific time of day. I have had to develop ways of working that take into account the fact that what I am looking at is constantly changing: each day I return to a site, objects have moved, things are different".*²⁴



The landscape is ingrained within Well's paintings: figuratively in that its changing unpredictable nature is captured in layers; but also literally because water from the site or from the Los Angeles River is used by the artist as a medium for paint or to soak the paper. The artist develops deep connections with the communities and contexts in which he works, getting to know the characters which inhabit the landscape and make up the ecology of Los Angeles.

²³ 'Sterling Wells,' in Love in Bright Landscapes (Perth: Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2021). <https://loveinbrightlandscapes.org.au/sterling-wells-field-notes/>
²⁴ Sterling Wells, 'Sterling Wells: Field notes,' (Perth: Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2021) <https://loveinbrightlandscapes.org.au/sterling-wells-field-notes/>

Image: Stirling Wells, Cowboy's Estate. Image courtesy the artist.

Over the course of five years the artist became familiar with a South Pasadena local called 'Cowboy' who has lived under the San Pascual Street Bridge for so long that he has made improvements to the land. Well's painting 'Cowboy's Estate' depicts land which has been terraced in flat paths, and cultivated with succulents, grass seed, and potted plants. The artist has developed ways of working which challenge traditional landscape painting. He often digs a hole to stand or sit in, or ties his seat to a riverbed so that his eye level is closer to ground instead of looking off into the distance. Here he can focus on small details in the foreground such as the wrapper on a piece of litter, or native California poppies pushing up through urban debris, as well as upon massive infrastructure in the distance.

Wells describes this process as challenging the Colonial Gaze of landscape painting which focuses on a faraway point. This sense of distance is dehumanising, and creates a division between 'Us' and 'The Other' which has been used by Western settlers to control and exploit the natural world and First Nation peoples.²⁵



²⁵ Karina Eileras, 'Reframing the colonial gaze: Photography, ownership, and feminist resistance,' MLN, no 118, (2003): 807-840.

²⁶ Australian Curriculum: Sustainability, <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/sustainability/>

Curriculum links:
Commentaries and Sustainability²⁶

Contemporary art can reveal insights into the ways social, economic and environmental systems interact to support human life.

Salote Tawale and Sterling Wells make social commentary about issues of power and environmental justice, drawing attention to connections between colonialism, economic systems and the natural world.

By providing thought-provoking experiences about ways of interpreting and engaging with the world, exhibitions like *I don't see colour* may contribute to a more sustainable future by:

- Examining more balanced approaches to interacting with each other and the environment.
- Inspiring individual and collective action across local and global communities.
- Helping to create a more ecologically and socially just world by transforming the relationships people have with culture, society, and their environment.
something about the world more broadly?

Images: Sterling Wells, LA River site photo. Image courtesy the artist.

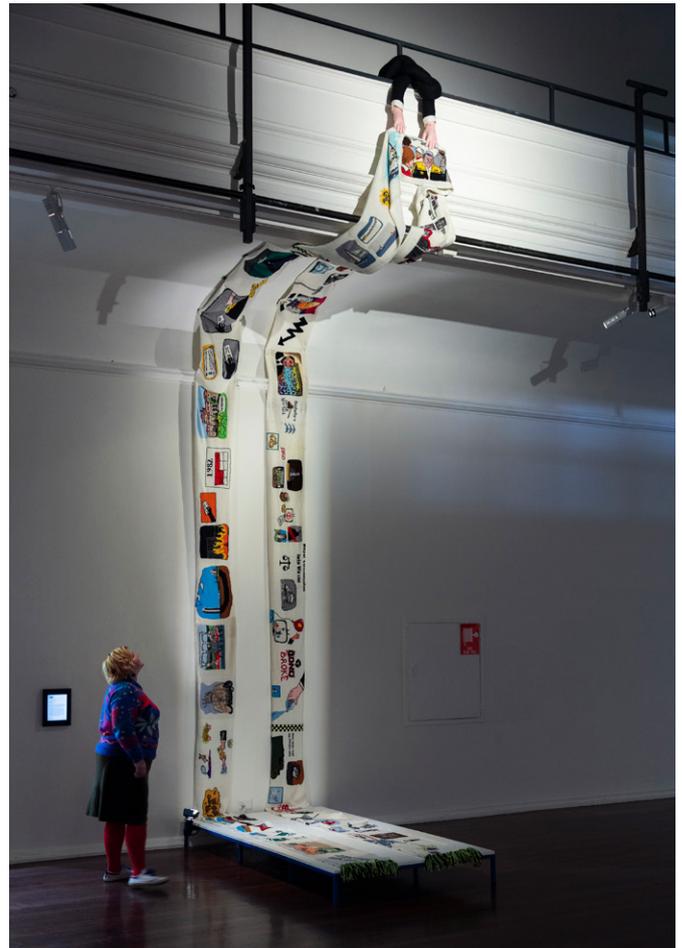
Once Upon a Time in.... (2021) by Emma Buswell

Emma Buswell explores multiple storylines in her epic textile work which takes the form of a 20-metre-long knitted scarf. She charts the chronology of her own lifetime against infamous moments in recent Perth history.

The artist has collected stories from a range of sources such as family, friends, internet forums and news headlines. She is interested in how local and personal mythologies chart a line between fact and fiction. The stories referenced have intentionally not been fact-checked or verified, deliberately allowing for rumour and hearsay.

Popular local culture has been woven together with the artist's own family history. She explores the political scandals, comic misadventures and significant events which defined Perth as a place during the time when her parents were the age she is now. Events were selected which reveal disruption to a sense of certainty, or a loss of innocence – such as the WA Inc scandal; fall from grace of Premier Brian Burke; and Skylab space station crashing to earth throughout Perth.

The knitted scarf is designed to fold and loop in on itself, drawing moments in history together, and bringing stories from the past into the present day. This shows the recurring nature of history, and boom and bust cycles of Perth's economy.



Named in reference to Quentin Tarantino's 2019 film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, the work is a satirical re-imagining of Hollywood's Golden Age set in Perth during the 1980s. This was a time of significant economic and cultural development in Western Australia during the third resources boom. The city became known as the 'Wild West' and developed an international presence when Australia won the America's Cup yacht race in Fremantle.

The work is inspired by the Bayeux tapestries which were the first textiles to describe historical events in narrative form. These tapestries sought to document Normandy conquering British Isle but have been edited with panels missing – showing that history is far from factual.

Image: Emma Buswell, *Once Upon a Time in....*, installation view, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), 2021. Photographer: Bo Wong.

Perth Cultural Centre
51 James St Northbridge
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