

PLEASE
ALLOW
ME TO
INTRODUCE
MYSELF

LIAM BENSON

GREGORY ELMS

JUAN FORD

ANNE MARIE GRAHAM

JOAN ROSS

NATALIE RYAN

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

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Australia, a country that enjoys some of the highest biodiversity in the world, also contends with one of the highest populations of introduced species. Aside from costing the economy several billions of dollars a year, the impact it has had on our sense of place is what *Please Allow me to Introduce Myself* attempts to explore.

White settlers have affected Australia's environmental ecology on a truly monumental scale, through the introduction of an equally monumental variety of species of flora and fauna. Hoofed animals continue to cause widespread destruction in a country where no such animals were ever naturally present. Australia has the largest wild camel population in the world and harbours feral pigs, goats, and several species of deer. We romanticise our feral horses, or 'brumbies' in prose through the cultural icon of the stockman, despite their devastating impact to fragile ecosystems not equipped to deal with large hoofed beasts.

Colonial yearnings for the 'motherland' led to a plethora of plants spreading beyond the confines of dainty English style gardens. Anne Marie Graham's painting *View to Bromeliads* is one of the artist's many studies of landscaped Australian gardens, most of which include a vast variety of introduced ornamental plants. Amongst a muted palette of greens and blues, this landscape appears situated somewhere between a high country mountain range and overgrown Victorian-era cottage garden. Part old-growth forest, part established provincial garden, Graham's depictions of foreign species are strangely exotic and yet familiar to our sense of place. Many of these plants are noxious and escaped landscaped gardens into the wilderness. Her paintings reveal a strange land, one in which I imagine Natalie Ryan's creatures inhabiting.

Ryan's taxidermied trophy animals are synonymous with those objects prized by hunters desiring to showcase their triumph over nature. However stripped of their fur, Ryan flocks the taxidermy mould in vibrant and unnatural colours, highlighting the irony of this colonialist mentality. The European goat was introduced in the 1880s in the hope they would consume the indigenous Tea Tree wilderness prevalent on the fringes of coastal farmland. They did not; many starved to death, a common end-result of introduced experimentation in Australia. The remainder ran wild up the Murray-Darling catchment area and elsewhere, continuing a path of

destruction to this day, not unlike the stereotypical white settler. They roam in vast herds headed by a large billy, represented here by Ryan's hot pink trophy head, *Pretty in Pink*, a protagonist in this strange-but-true narrative, who gazes at us with knowing ambivalence.

At least eight marsupial species owe their extinction largely to the introduction of the Red Fox in the 1800s. The Red Fox continues to roam farmland and urban areas, patrolling a personal territory of up to 18km. Gregory Elms' intimate, detailed photographic portraits of introduced and native taxidermy put us in close quarters with these animals. His *Red Fox* emerges from a darkly sublime space in a haunting, lifelike manner. Like Ryan's creatures, their artificial fidelity is matched with a knowing, almost seductive expression.

In Liam Benson's photography and video performance, he commonly cross-dresses in a deliberate subversion of traditional Aussie masculine conventions. Here, in *Mrs Boss slays the malevolent scoundrel*, our caretaker of the Australian Bush is not the heroic stockman or bushranger, but Mrs Boss. A dandy woman with a fox fur stole and regal Victorian gown, she stalks her introduced prey at high speed through dense bush, at times accompanied by her mongrel sidekick. Once emerging onto cleared farmland, past an introduced English willow, through a dry, eroded riverbank and onto a field overlooking settlement, she lines up her enemy and fires. As Mrs Boss swaggers into the sunset, gun over her shoulder, she holds a second fox fur, having claimed her trophy.

Aside from the European rabbit and subsequent introduction of not-so-fantastic (Mr) fox to Australia, settlers made a consistent flurry of poor ecological solutions to remedy the dramatic affect introduced species were having on this sensitive, diverse continent. The Indian Mynah, a common sight in Melbourne and most urban areas, was introduced to control locust plagues (due to crops). An aggressive and innately adaptable pest, it now occupies a majority of the continent, regarded as one of the worst invasive species in the world. A common thread to this saga, aside from the attempted genocide and subsequent marginalisation of indigenous populations, is the incessant cycle of colonisation's destruction of the natural environment. Simultaneously romanticised and destroyed, our native flora are national emblems and yet their existence is threatened by us.

Juan Ford's paintings from 2007 to the current day have commonly contained a beautifully unsettling motif of strangled native flora bathed in bright Australian light. Here iconic national plant species such as Bottlebrush, Banksia and Eucalypt are covered in paint, wrapped in tape and confined in cling-wrap, in a confronting slight at a diminishing ecology and purity of the Australian bush. In his installation *Do unto Other, as You Would Have it do to you*, Ford has reconstructed what at first appears to be a native Eucalypt, but on closer inspection the incongruity of the branches and stems is apparent. Ford has surgically stitched various native species together with stainless steel brackets and clamps, resulting in a hybrid "Franken-tree". The site-specific installation is a fitting allegory to the history of feeble attempts to control and manipulate nature in Australia, and the evolving natural environment due to introduced species. In Ford's work, our environmental impact is not hiding in the rural back country, it is plain to see, and obvious as to whom is to blame.

Joan Ross' aptly titled video animation *The claiming of things* reveals to us the colonisers who began this new, adversarial manipulation of the land, contrary to the first Australians' intimate, symbiotic relationship. Set within an appropriated John Glover landscape painting, indigenous Australians are calm spectators to the parodied colonisation played out in Ross' video, sitting on the banks of a pristine riverbank to the sounds of the native bush. In comes whitefella of supposed 'wealth and taste'. As the colonial era characters flaunt about, a 'McMansion' materialises across the river, a high-vis picket fence cuts the land in half, and construction machinery arrives, shoving a multicoloured cacophony of western consumer-culture detritus into the river. Everything from a flat screen television to a pink poodle is tossed into the water. The crown jewels are nestled on top of this pile in an overt nod to the British monarch, which sits comfortably amongst the gaudy colours and cheap 'bling'. An electronic road sign wheels in with important messages, to take heed of our past follies and 'prepare to merge', but 'expect delays'. The consequences are obvious, as Ross' narrative ends with the first Australians retreating upon an impending storm, which floods the river, taking our meaningless material possessions with it. With obvious biblical overtones, the flood returns the land to its original sludge, a blank slate on which to host (dis)topia's project anew.