

Jo Meisner
Mandy Burgess
Michelle Belgiorno
Renuka Fernando
Michelle Connolly
Tilly Lees
Ro Murray
Deborah Burdett

Hold Everything Dear

14 May to 1 June 2019

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Using John Berger's collection of insightful essays as a departure point, the exhibition brings together the work of eight female artists who explore values and memories that each considers important.

Michelle Belgiorno, Deborah Burdett, Mandy Burgess, Michelle Connolly, Renuka Fernando, Tilly Lees, Jo Meisner and Ro Murray, try to make sense of our rapidly changing world, impacted by trauma, social isolation, changing notions of truth, aging, memory loss, and the imminent threats of climate change.

Opened on 18 May by Lorraine Kypiotis,
Senior Lecturer Art History, National Art School

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Hold Everything Dear is a call. A call sounding at variable volume, tone and modulation; anything from an injunctive invocation cried out loud to something more like a muttering to oneself. This is the setting for the varied works in this exhibition. Eight artists present works that veer between the direct and politicised to the intimate and nuanced. These artists have responded generally to the call to hold everything dear and more specifically, to the eponymous book of essays by Berger (2008).ⁱ There is a sense of pause too – of restrained urgency and reflection, as while the Berger writings are lucid they are also overwhelmingly anguished and were published well over a decade ago. In many ways this exhibition is an opportunity for crafting a wealth of visual responses to the despair of contemporary terrorism, occupation, war and ethics of global power in the intervening time. Facing the enormity of such issues, in an era of increasingly fragmented and globalised humanity, the art made simply reflects the human range.

As a country was invaded, and with no peace in sight, an artist wrote to John Berger, The world today is hard to look at, let alone think of.ⁱⁱ And yet, this is what artists do. What is it to *Hold Everything Dear*?

There are certain moments of looking at a familiar mountain which are unrepeatable. A question of a particular light, an exact temperature, the wind, the season. You could live seven lives and never see the mountain quite like that again; its face is as specific as a momentary glance across a table at breakfast.

While mountains are massive, immovable (perhaps even immortal) there is this overwhelmingly tender observation – that which is valuable, precious, held dear, the Everything – is not only faceted but is nearby, in daily lives and histories. This is also a feature of the Berger book; where we are led to face a mountain of pain, to ask how to continue without any plausible vision of the future? A stark question, placed beside lines of achingly lovely poetry (by Gareth Evans) for gentle answer;

the jug of this life, as it fills with the days / as it sinks to become what it lovesⁱⁱⁱ

Murray's *Study for the Miner's Hut* fixes the gaze on the mountain as a heap of coal – a dark, loaded and heavy history of coal dependency. By tying titles to hashtags and contested mine sites, the work directly references contemporary sites of contest and activism around coal mining. While the hard-edged geometric forms, the warning colours of black and red signal the language

of protest and of clear-cut positions on the issue (*#keepitintheground*), these are ameliorated by materials and context. RAM board is a temporary flooring product, produced from recycled elements, the paint is a gloss Weathershield and the miner's hut itself is no longer in use, but a historical museum display in Sydney's Blue Mountain, elements which suggests the future is fraught and intertwined with myriad other environmental issues.

A number of the artists have utilised recycled and found materials or objects to allude to the passing of time, the prevalence of memory and to evoke a sense of loss and nostalgia for place and people. This repurposing is a way of *reseeing* the mountain. Materials such as paper, textiles, leather, timber and glass are versatile for their ability to hold time within; marks of wear becoming a part of its structure. Through processes that are tactile and draw on craft traditions, they offer a chance to leave traces of the hand, as touch.

Belgiorno's work *Vessels* is an installation of seedpod or cocoon-like objects, hollow and torn open, suspended from branches. As dried and hollowed husks these organic forms seem to reference a past time of fertility or fruiting while their present barrenness suggest vulnerability and perhaps, function also as metaphors for the uncertain present. Washi paper, itself handmade, was sourced from drawings, dampened and torn to transform into remade forms. In this way the torn drawings (of valued objects) are a condensed material archive of the past but also, contain the observation that mere things are ephemeral and transient. The forms deliberately mirror and repeat familiar natural ones, the rounded surfaces, earthy palette and uneven textures so descriptive of life cycles, reproduction, renewal and healing.

The innate tactility of textiles and their ability to describe the comfort of touch is also present in Burgess's *Fit our vision to the dark*, an installation about home. Using the malleability of fabric and the scale of the louvre windows in the artist's own home, the work forms an impression of architecture-as-memory. The window, a structure for looking outward, from a safe place into an uncertain one is echoed, but in tulle and distorted timber. Working from a deeply personal context, of a home about to be vacated, Burgess conjures that which is dear when physical spaces are left – the warmth of domesticity, of humans filling architecture, of our need for shelter deepened by the joy of familial rhythms, peace, connection and the growth of children into adults. Foreshadowing loss and its attendant anxiety, the window is the setting for seeing that dark mountain; the sheer quality of tulle and the misshapen grid making the view beyond hazy and indistinct.

The Contemplation of Loss by Fernando takes the form of delicate new life – green shoots sprout freely from a clay cooking pot that was used in the artist's father's restaurant. The death of a parent and the inevitable legal and other formalities that followed, led to a series of artworks that literally grow from loss as seeds are sown on to paper pulped from shredded copies of the artist's father's last Will and Testament. As the seeds are watered, plants grow from the document. Grief, private and public, emblematically return the text to soil while the fecundity of growth reveals the continuance of life, renewal and hope. This contemplation imbues the personally felt loss with the empathy of shared celebration.

Hold everything, Dear / Discard something inexpensive / Keep something special / Forsake nothing precious / Hold, everything dear! In Burdett's own words, the cadence and emphasis shifts – it is all a question of nuance and intonation. Describing the array of materials presented in the work as originating from the *fragmented diaspora* of the artist's own existence: the collected objects, images, bones, hides, rural fragments, artefacts, slogan-like snippets of text, textures and crafted textiles are displayed in considered arrangements. This, and the uniform palette of antique patina lends the work the quality of a diorama or movie set, and the narrative proceeds outwards from the autobiographical to the communal, from a life to lives, from the personal to the political and from the symbolic to the real. Wearing the marks of age, there is a chair for sitting and looking, and bizarrely, a Mexican puppet that looks back (for the artist, a personal symbol of the voyeur).

Running through Berger's essays are deeply felt personal stories: the devastation of loss mingled with the warmth of family comforts and transformative art and poetry. Other artists in the exhibition seek to access and portray the human condition by depicting and engaging with familiar human narratives, essentially stories of people.

Meisner's work consists of small-scaled human figures, photographic prints enlivened by brightly coloured layers of collaged fabric in perspex. Standing on plinths, these figures move us back and forth between considering the individual and the crowd. Somehow, they are at once anonymous and recognisable, collective and differentiated, achieving an oscillation of form and concept. Driven by a strong sense of empathy and concern for the global phenomena of displaced populations, Meisner works inwards from these broad themes to consider the impact of forced relocation, migration or simply movement, on the individuals photographed. Humans and humanity are depicted in a permanent state of contemplative transit.

Connolly's figurative paintings and sculptures are influenced by an ongoing interest in folk, tribal, primitive and outsider traditions of figuration. These human and quasi-human figures are depicted in an active chaos of bright colour and texture, displaying energetic mark making and a variety of materials. Paint, collage, wire and ceramic elements are meshed, woven and joined together. Most of the figures feature an open mouth and it is interesting to imagine them giving full voice to the exhibition title, *Hold Everything Dear*, in full throated chorus.

Lees will be making an interactive work, engaging with visitors to the exhibition, here and now. Building on a recent participatory project in a hospital environment, Lees intends to make a wall of written notes; *A Little Good* for this gallery within a school. The invitation (also issued over social media) is for people to share the good by contributing *a sentence describing a particular moment that has brought joy*. These will be displayed and transcribed as the exhibition progresses. Lees sees her work as a balm to the prevailing stream of negativity in the media. The pause, to be created by the work, will be time – time to sit, reflect and write, enabling not just the artist's hand, but a host of other hands, to be visible in the final work.

This exhibition can be seen to function as a Greek chorus. They look at the mountain. *They cannot affect the outcome of what is being shown. They do not interpret. They question, listen, observe and then give voice to what the viewer may, more or less inarticulately, be feeling.*^{iv}

Eight voices; female voices, singing *hold everything dear*.

Lisa Sharp
May 2019

ⁱ Berger, John, *Hold Everything Dear - Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*, 2007: Vintage Books (2008), New York, USA

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 55

ⁱⁱⁱ Extract from Gareth Evans, *Hold Everything Dear* for John Berger (2005), *Ibid.* viii – ix

^{iv} Berger, *Ibid.* 87

MICHELLE BELGIORNO



Vessels, 2019
washi, rice glue, branches, seedpods
and found organic material

An installation of cocoon like pods, which nurture and protect cultural values. The vessels are ruptured and the values have metamorphosed into unfamiliar and unexpected forms.

The work alludes to the rise of the Internet and social media, which challenge our notions of truth, community, friendship, trust, identity and democracy.

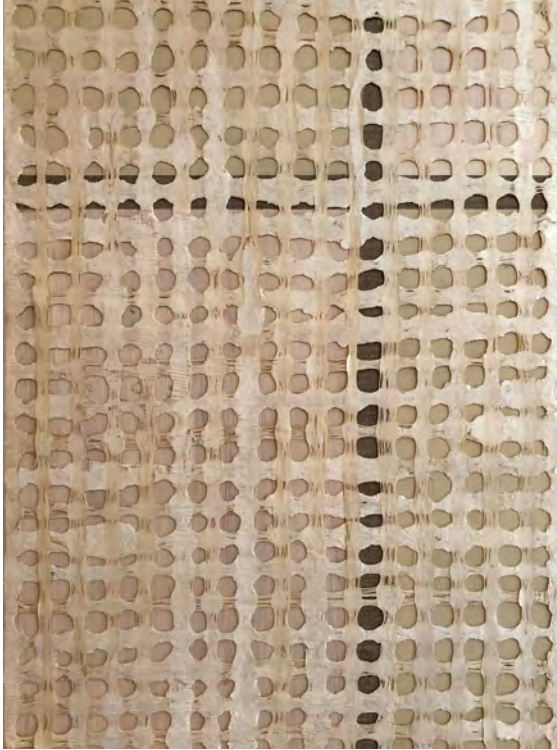
The vessels and emerging values are made from recycled drawings on Washi paper and found organic matter, suggesting the fragility and impermanence of these values but also the possibility of renewal.

Michelle Belgiorno's work explores human culture in all its diversity. She has a long-standing interest in the inscrutable culture and aesthetics of Japan.

www.michellebelgiorno.com

Instagram: [@michellebelgiornoartist](https://www.instagram.com/michellebelgiornoartist)

DEBORAH BURDETT



33°S151°E, 2019, collage, paper, paint on canvas

In these works I'm thinking of life, death, materiality, displacement, betrayal and loss. I use old, found, recycled and reclaimed materials – foraged, reworked, mended, altered and saved. Some are remnants from my physical worlds – scraps of fabric, collections, found objects from rural Victoria, those discovered from treasure hunts and incarnations of older art.

The fragmented diaspora of my own existence.

I use textile techniques from weaving, stitching and crocheting to clay work, painting and collage which extend my beliefs of 'craft as comfort'. Natural fibres and materials continuously resurface – wool off my own sheep's back, pelts, skins, rope, twines etc. Repeated symbols appear – poppets, crosses, farm objects, dolls, bones, horses, nests and nets – mementos of intersections and sacrifices of a life more over than begun.

Instagram: [@burraburd](https://www.instagram.com/burraburd)

MANDY BURGESS



Fit Our Vision to the Dark, 2019
fabric, wood and acrylic

Mandy Burgess is an emerging artist who works across practices of drawing, sculpture and installation, using paper as the primary material. She completed her honours year in drawing in 2012 from the National Art School. Of particular interest to her are tensions between ideas of what bonds together and forces that fragment; and the relationship between the personal world and the political.

She has begun a project of casting in paper significant elements of the suburban house that she and her family are leaving after having lived there for 25 years. These are starting points for works processing the messy and complex memories of the ups and downs and emotions of family life. They also reflect on the movements in society of politics, environment and technology, which have induced feelings of precariousness and anxiety for the future.

Instagram: [@mandybur](https://www.instagram.com/mandybur)

MICHELLE CONNOLLY



Fragile Imaginary Friends
Princess, mixed media

I am a mixed media painter and sculptor influenced by tribal and primitive artwork. I enjoy creating quirky and fanciful human and animal characters. There is no planned story behind these creations, but I use them to trigger off new works and to keep an internal dialogue going.

I lived in North Carolina, USA for seven years (2007-2014), where I became familiar with visionary/folk art. I was inspired by its honest raw energy and started to use found material more and more in my works. A recent series of flattened box drawings is filling my studio walls. These sometimes turn into studies for larger works.

Since 2010 I have been making figures out of a variety of found material: clay, wire, wood and paint, inspired by the puppets made by artist Paul Klee. Holding everything dear in the use of repurposed materials, these works have a history in their make up – stories to be told and although they stand alone they also come together in a dialogue with each other. These poor scraps are turned into rich trophies – waste not, want not.

www.michelleconnollyart.com

www.instagram.com/connollyart

www.facebook.com/michelleconnollyart



The Contemplation of Loss, 2019
paper pulp, seeds in clay pot

Fernando's work *The contemplation of Loss* is a part of an ongoing investigation of the transformative power of grief. Following the death of her father, this body of work considers personal loss, family connection and commemoration. Paper pulp has been made from shredded copies of her father's will from which seeds grow. This signifies not only the processing of grief but the constant cycle of life that continues after loved ones are gone.

www.renukafernando.com
Instagram: @renfernando



Identity
Photographic prints,
fabric, Perspex

I am an established artist based in Sydney. My practice spans photography, installation and sculptural assemblage and probes contemporary notions of identity. The crowd and the individual are two concepts that I return to as subjects in my work, which has variously focused on the cultural and social impact of forced migration and the fabric of the individual psyche. My own personal experiences of institutionalisation as a teenager and growing up as the descendant of Eastern European Jewish immigrants are formative influences on my work to date.

My work playfully aligns itself with the history of figurative painting as well as the traditions of street photography and the history of textile manufacture. Processes of swaddling, pinning and wrapping are central to my practice and are material concerns that recall the act of 'mothering' in the development of the individual. The ordinary scene of a crowd in transit is a repeated motif in my work, which is characterised by the representation of anonymous figures observed from the rear and side view. From the context of the crowd, individuals are isolated and replaced by mirrors, shadows and tactile reliefs; in this way the figure becomes a surrogate for psychological introspection and self-identification and my work could be read as a means of oblique self-portraiture.

<http://jomeisner.com.au/>
[instagram.com/jomeisner](https://www.instagram.com/jomeisner)

TILLY LEES



A Little Good, 2019
interactive artwork
metal sheets, magnets,
paper, pens, desk, chairs

Tilly Lees works across painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking and installation. She completed her Masters of Contemporary Art at the University of Sydney in 2017, culminating with a solo show in front of the Great Hall at the University's main campus.

Tilly's emerging art practice investigates the emotional and social freedom and constraints of the individual within our society by exploring physical and political concerns and injustices. She is interested in our vulnerabilities, complexities and transgressions.

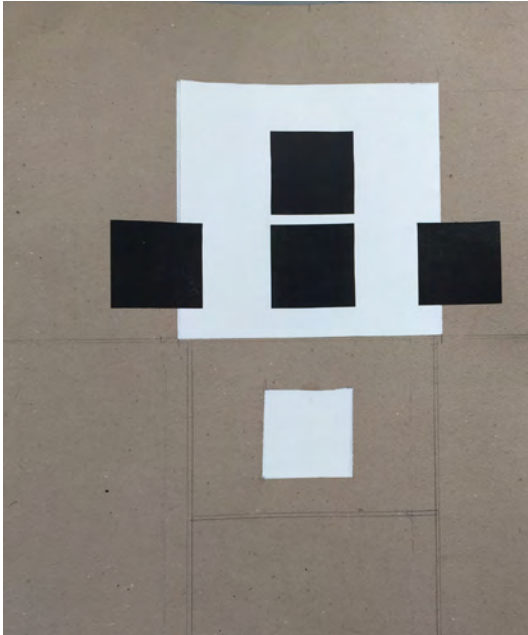
She recently completed a residency at Royal Prince Albert Hospital that invited patients, staff and visitors to write words of kindness. The inclusive artwork has become a permanent exhibit in the hospital foyer. Exploring the power of words by celebrating the individual marks we make, we can see ourselves in the messages as both giver and receiver.

For *Hold Everything Dear*, Tilly explore our mark making as a universal act of communication by asking visitors to share a 'little good'.

In our contemporary media world we are constantly presented with what's wrong, what's broken and what's bad. Tilly's interactive artwork will be a panacea to the negative media bombardment by asking participants to share what's good in their lives, from the momentary to the profound.

'I woke to the scent of Murraya blossoms on the night air'.
'Toast with crunchy peanut butter for breakfast'.
'My husband emptied the dishwasher today'.

Instagram: [Tilly Lees](#)



Study for Miners Hut Table
collage on ram board,
Dulux Weathershield

Study for the Miner's Hut is a scaled drawing for the installation #keepitintheground recently exhibited at Sculpture at Scenic World in Katoomba. This work continues her geometric compositions in red and black as a language of protest, currently against coal mining and for climate action. The works have titles, prefixed by hashtags, of coal fired power stations and coalmines.

This series of abstract geometric work started at the end of 2017 with lino printing onto her dead filed architectural negatives. The series progressed onto larger size A-series paper, to assemblages with painted plywood, to painted murals on plywood billboards and plasterboard walls.

In *The Miners Hut* at The Scenic World exhibition, the painted plywood panels are based on 30 cm squares in red, white and black. The panels were nailed directly onto the timber walls.

The Miners Hut is a reproduction of one in the coal-mining village there from 1870-1930s, beside the World Heritage Wilderness of the Blue Mountains National Park.

Ro Murray received BFA (Hons) NAS 2011, B. Arch (Hons) UNSW 1977. She is currently Manager of Factory49 in Marrickville.

