

Bush-bathing in the Australian Uncanny: An Interview with Lia McKnight

Lia McKnight is a Perth-based artist who seamlessly moves between drawing, textiles, installation and sculpture. McKnight's beautifully strange, yet eerily familiar works confuse the boundaries between the 'natural' and the 'personal'—an idea that she and eleven other artists explore in a new group show at the Fremantle Arts Centre.

I love the drawings you've been posting on Instagram lately.

Aw, thanks!

Are you working towards something new?

I'm creating a series of works for a group show at Fremantle Arts Centre called *Sensual Nature*.

Awesome! What's the show about?

The exhibition explores our relationship with nature through ecological, philosophical and phenomenological perspectives. A common thread in all the artworks is a sensual use of materials or imagery. Many works have strong tactile qualities that I think will be quite alluring.

Who are the other artists?

Sarah Elson, Nalda Searles, Miik Green, Andrew Nicholls and Holly Story from WA; Angela Valamanesh and Julia Robinson from SA; Heather B Swann from ACT and Tane Andrews, Penny Evans and Juz Kitson from NSW.

How did the show come about?

After a residency at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2016, I proposed a solo exhibition to Fremantle Arts Centre. The themes in the show resonated with the curator, Ric Spencer and he proposed developing the exhibition into a group show.

So, is it about exploring that tension between two modes of relating to nature—on the one hand, finding pleasure in something supposedly untouched by human beings, and on the other, the need master and control it?

I think you've certainly picked up on a theme that Ric is interested in exploring. Thinking about early religion—pagan and animist religions, for example—people's relationship with nature was far more integrated to all aspects of life. This is obviously still the case with many aboriginal cultures in which there is a sacredness and respect towards land, plants, animals, rivers, and so on. This spiritual

connection is not relegated to a particular time or place—unlike going to church on a Sunday morning.

There is an understanding of belonging to country—and the responsibility as caretaker that goes with that—rather than a perception that nature is a resource to be exploited, romanticised, aestheticised.

While there may be a sense of joy and wonder within that latter mode of interaction, it still represents a consciousness in which we are separate from nature.

Ric and I are both interested in a philosophical understanding of nature that goes far beyond this kind of dualistic paradigm of ‘us’ and ‘nature.’

It sounds like there’s a little creative ecology going on too in your collaboration with Ric. Is that why you chose to do a group show?

Ric liked the concepts behind the solo proposal and could see something bigger, and I think better. As a contemporary artist you want to participate in concept driven group shows because it contextualises your work differently and it sparks ideas.

For me, this particular exhibition offers a unique opportunity to engage with nationally significant artists and curators, about issues and concepts that underpin my practice.

You’re a curator too , are you mixing the best parts of being an artist with the best parts of being a curator with this show?

Ric has been very generous in including me in curatorial discussions and we have both enjoyed talking through the concepts driving the show. So, in a sense, yes. I get the best parts of being a curator without actually being one in this instance.

I’m very happy not to take on the responsibilities or workload of curator for this project. It’s really nice to let go and see someone else’s vision as it develops and not be too attached to the outcome.

How much does a curator drive a show like this?

With a themed group exhibition like this, the curator’s vision certainly does drive things. With *Sensual Nature*, Ric’s vision has allowed my very small and personal story to become much broader and richer. I think audiences will really be blown away by what they see. It’s going to be a very sexy show . . . and a bit creepy. Love it or hate it, I don’t think people will walk away unmoved.

Can you describe some of your influences in developing this project?

The title of my current series of work is called ‘Sacred Animate.’ I took inspiration from cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram’s writings on animism, as well as the spiritual teachings of Eckhart Tolle. Both describe the phenomenology of

sensual experience from the perspective that the human *perceiver* and the *perceived*—in this case, nature—benefit from actively participating with one another.

What is it particularly about Abram’s writing that you connect with?

There are a lot of things that Abram talks about that resonate with what I’m doing right now. There’s a great [interview with Abram by Derrick Jensen](#) that I really like. One favourite quote is:

“Perception is a kind of improvised dance with the world, a dynamic interaction between my sensing body and the sensuous landscape.”

Generally, there’s a kind of urgency in both Abram and Tolle’s writings which highlights a need to shift our perceptions so that we begin to see ourselves as part of nature rather than separate from it.

Abram talks about the magic of coming into contact with nature—with something so alive yet divorced from our usual experience. That idea of ‘magic’ is quite enticing. It also makes me think of Hayao Miyazaki, whose films such as Princess Mononoke and Nausica are very inspiring to me. Also May Gibbs, who captured a sense of magic in the Australian bush. I love the idea of secret worlds pulsing and thriving beyond our awareness.

A lot of your drawings on Instagram include the hashtag ‘uncannynature’. Is the uncanny part of that ‘improvised dance’?

I think the improvised dance that Abrams describes is simply a mode of interacting with the world that is very ‘present’. The uncanny can take us there by catching us off guard. It can allow an experience to occur which can’t immediately be understood or categorised by the mind.

I’ve been interested in the uncanny for many years. The point that Freud talks about where the everyday and the familiar becomes eerie or creepy is endlessly fascinating to me.

Yeah, I always liked the idea of how Freud used the word *unheimlich* for the uncanny, which literally translates in German as ‘unhomely’.

The uncanny feels like it doesn’t belong within our sense of ‘home,’ and yet, as Freud says, the word for ‘home’ in German is linguistically indivisible from ‘unhomely’ just the same as it is emotionally. That way the eerily ‘unfamiliar’ is really in actual fact ‘familiar,’ but made strange by repression—by embarrassment, fear and forgetting.

Yeah, I like Freud’s association with the domestic through the word *unheimlich*. Home is a place where our best and worst experiences often unfold. It’s where we are most vulnerable, but also where we feel most safe generally. The bedroom has a

particular fascination for me for this reason. It's the place where nightmares, pleasures and mundanity meet.

There's definitely an uncanny quality in your drawings. I see it with the wooden banksia nuts and the fungi especially. They look alien but in that uncanny way of being both pleasant and unpleasant...

The natural objects I've been collecting and photographing often have anthropomorphic qualities or can be slightly abject or grotesque, but they're also inherently beautiful. That's why I've been using the hashtag 'uncannynature'. Using these objects in my work, I'm attempting to create a space in which the everyday and the sacred coalesce. I think this is a real space we all encounter and create but don't necessarily recognise. It is that process or phenomenon where things become precious simply because of the significance we place upon them.

Objects hold the memory of our interactions with them and describe the passage of time through signs of aging, wear and tear . . . And something more I think. I guess this underlines my use of specific materials and objects in my practice, such as felt, silk, metals as well as found objects. I'm interested in the associations and meanings we ascribe to them as well as their physicality and aesthetics.

In the end, this is all a very long-winded way of saying that I'm interested in 'affect'. When I experience art, I want to feel something.

The best kind of response is a kind of highly charged moment of awareness in which you to cease to think or intellectualise.

Hopefully these joyful, creepy, sexy things I create have something of that effect! Like seeing something you vaguely remember from a dream... a taste of something you can't quite recall.

That tension between the 'homely' and the 'unhomely' also makes me think of my childhood experiences growing up surrounded by scrubland. Yet, as a kid, I remember being so inundated with images of my parents' idea of 'home' which meant the green lushness of England. But those images didn't look like where I lived. My home, the dry bush that I played in every day and built cubby houses and so on was treated as though it wasn't there. It was abject—an inconvenience that was being slowly eaten up by cheap brick houses.

I definitely can't get enough of the Australian bush, especially the seemingly rangy scrub around Perth. I grew up with a beautiful native garden. It was like a little oasis surrounded by lawn and palm trees.

The Australian landscape is a long way from the European ideal. It has certainly been used to great effect in film and literature to create a sense of foreboding and alienation.

Yeah, true. The Australian gothic.

But I don't find it abject in that sense though.

I always thought the Australian landscape is an acquired taste, but once you get it, it's beautiful in an ugly way.

I don't find it ugly at all! I've always been drawn to the bush, although I did find it somewhat unimpressive as a kid, particularly after visiting the forests and rain forests of the south-west and east coast and in Asia too. But there's so much diversity here, so many delicate wonders. The wildflowers, of course, but also weird fungi and lichen, insects and reptiles. You have to pause to notice these things.

Do you go for regular walks in the bush?

Yes, I have a few places I love to go, depending on the season and whether snakes are active. I have a collection of things in my studio that I refer back to. I often take photos while I'm out walking, but I find it works best to draw from real objects. If I ever run out of ideas, walking in the bush is always the best remedy.

How does the 'uncanny' unfold in your work?

I think the uncanny in my drawings emerges through combining recognisable objects with the unreal or imagined.

Like drawing a banksia with finger-like appendages or a strange seepage—the object is known but confusingly foreign or erotic or creepy, causing a kind of visual rupture.

I love to give agency to these previously inanimate objects. So, there is a watching quality. Them watching us. Or a sense that something is happening here that is beyond our awareness or control.

Yeah, I get this sense of 'twoness' in many of your works—two objects in the process of coming into contact. A banksia nut joined with fungus, or two banksia nuts looking as though they've been caught mid-conversation. Is a sense contact and twoness part of the draw of the uncanny for you?

I've been interested in the idea of mirroring for some time now. It's certainly a visual motif that I have been exploring in my drawings, and it is starting to emerge in my sculptural practice also. This is generally where the 'duos' you mention fit in. Part of that is the idea that contained in every 'thing' is its opposite.

Like the 'homely,' 'unhomely' thing.

Yeah. I like paradoxes like that. It opens up the potential for me to explore themes of transformation, for example, like the potential for pain or suffering to transform into awareness. I spoke about the crucifixion in reference to mirrored works I created last year for ['Stations of the cross'](#).

Using ink in the way I do, I'm also interested in associations with the Rorschach psychological test which uses mirrored ink patterns. This provides a connection to the subconscious and psyche.

Is your contribution to the upcoming group show mainly drawings this time around?

I'm creating a large body of drawings, but I'm working toward a series of objects as well. These incorporate a range of materials, including textiles like stitched silks and wool, with ceramics. The objects are always quite challenging as they tend not to come together until the last minute! Mostly because they are intuitive—I'm responding to the materials rather than working to a prescribed idea.

So, how long do the drawings take? Is it a long process?

The drawings can take anywhere from hours, for very small ones, to months for larger ones. They can be very slow and intensely laborious, with multiple layers of pencil and ink, but they also take a while because there are times when I need to leave them alone and come back to them.

When does colour enter the process? Towards the end?

There are two types of media that I use for colour—pigmented ink and coloured pencil. The ink can come in quite early in the process, but the coloured pencil is generally the last element I apply.

I was reading the other day about naturalist Joseph Banks—who, of course, the banksia is named after—and his illustrator Sydney Parkinson. Parkinson drew the specimens that Banks collected on the *Endeavour* voyage. One thing that struck me was how at the time making illustrations was part of how science did the work of engaging deeply with the natural world.

Nowadays, scientific discovery depends on the advances of [spit-second](#) photography and digital scanning. But up until the late-nineteenth century, people of learning sat in meditative silence, gazing long and hard at nature. And they drew by hand, trying to get isolated fragments of the natural world down on the page so they could be understood better.

Sorry. Long set up to a question. What's that process like for you? What's it like to sit making or manipulating objects in this way? Has something been lost in the digital era?

I think there is a place for everything and scientific advances have certainly opened up a valuable wealth of knowledge. For me, creating objects and drawings can be quite meditative. It's fun too. Sometimes it doesn't go the way you want which can be hard, but these experiences offer the most in terms of opportunities for growth.

I think that process of meditatively spending time in nature is sorely missing from our contemporary lives. The Japanese call it *shinrin-yoku* or 'forest bathing'.

I want to make time to be in wild places without the pressing need to be somewhere else, which often is the case.

In so many ways, I believe this simple activity has the potential to shift the current trajectory .

[Sensual Nature](#) runs from 29 March until the 20 May 2018 at the Fremantle Arts Centre. You can also see more of Lia's work [on her website](#), or by following her on [Instagram](#).