

BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY | ESSENCE OF CLOUD

New Craft ACT exhibitions overcome 2020 challenges and explore earth, sky and everything in between



Canberra, Australia: Award-winning glass and textile artists have rejoiced in nature, creating work that responds to and celebrates the land, and creates a world – both real and imagined – in which triumph over adversity and collaboration with our neighbours is the greater story of life.

“Our natural world is restorative and a source of extraordinary inspiration for artists. The two new exhibitions were impacted by the setbacks, delays and challenges of 2020, but these experienced artists have overcome adversity and created beautiful and thoughtful works which help to make sense of our world,” said Craft ACT CEO and Artistic Director Rachael Coghlan said.

Between Earth and Sky features the work of 2020 Craft ACT artists-in-residence Jennifer Kemarre Martiniello and Sharon Peoples, whose residency plans were delayed – but in no way diminished – due to the pandemic. The new exhibition which features textiles, glass and mixed media is a result of the acclaimed Craft ACT residency last year at the Ready-Cut Cottage in Namadgi National Park and research of the National Museum of Australia.

“When the devastating Namadgi bushfires hit our region last year, our Craft ACT community was deeply affected. Our long-term relationship with ACT Parks meant that we were on high alert and highly anxious for the safety of our ranger colleagues and the survival of the Gudgenby Valley which has been a source of creative renewal for Craft ACT artists over many years. It was a great relief when Namadgi NP Manager Brett McNamara and Mel Barton took us on a tour of Namadgi last year after the fires. The devastation was overwhelming – the strength of the fires, heavy rains and impact of climate change destroyed the landscape and profoundly changed the park’s appearance. But when we saw that Ready-Cut cottage and surrounding valley had been ingeniously protected by the rangers, it was very emotional. This had been the site of transformation for so many artists and its survival buoyed our spirits, renewed our deep respect for the team at ACT Parks and made us more determined than ever to sustain this valuable residency into the future,” said Coghlan.

The artists spent time in November and December 2020 – 8 months later than planned - at the remote Ready-Cut Cottage located in the miraculously unspoilt Gudgenby Valley, kept safe from the devastating fires nearby in the national park. For the artists, this time away was an opportunity to step back from the challenges of 2020 and to reflect and rejoice in nature.

"I gave myself over to the rhythms and cycles of the valley, allowed myself to be absorbed by it, relearned the principle of the conservation of energy from our ever-present kin, the kangaroos. I quietly, slowly gathered not just native fibres and split and twined them, but recorded the natural time of the valley in photographs of shadow-shifting trees, rocks like sacred edifices and shrines, river and reeds, and the stark and beautiful fire scarred mountains and their emphatic rejuvenation. Always was, always will be..." said Jenni Martiniello, an award winning visual artist and writer of Aboriginal (Arrernte), Chinese and Anglo-Celtic descent.

The residency gives artists an opportunity to expand their practice: artists experiment with limited materials and respond to their natural surroundings. Textiles artist Sharon Peoples embraced the challenge: using thick red string (given as a gift from her niece, a chef) she embroidered musical notes representing the magic of birdsong onto the wire fence surrounding the historic cottage.

"Playing at the fence, 'stitching' into the hexagonal spaces of the wire, I made the connection with a form of lace known as punto in aria, drawing in air, a Venetian lace, familiar in Elizabethan ruffs. In the afternoon as musical notes became apparent, and staves were woven, a bird began its mating call practice. The sound transported me immediately to childhood holidays at our beach house, knowing the sound was a butcher bird. ... I began to draw the melody (and) enchantment took over," said Sharon, who won the Craft ACT outstanding practice award in 2020.

The acclaimed artist-in-residence program is the result of a 15-year partnership between ACT Parks and Conservation and Craft ACT, one of Australia's longest continuous running visual arts membership associations. Usually presented in Autumn, the close relationship between the organisations ensured the residency was retained, which has produced outstanding and uplifting results.

Essence of Cloud is an ambitious and multilayered exhibition which tells a whimsical historical tale about an imaginary cloud substance which produces elation, longevity and increased empathy.

Acclaimed flameworker Mark Elliott invented this extraordinary narrative canvassing five centuries and seven countries inspired by the famous 17th century Spanish Trick Glass at the Corning Glass Museum in New York (the world's largest glass museum). The exhibition features hand-made glass objects and mixed-media installations of wood, scent, animation, sound and found objects, displayed as museum-like artifacts. With glass workshops closing down during Covid, Mark's exhibition had to be deferred to allow him time and facilities to make the work.

This new and much anticipated exhibition is, literally, more than meets the eye as highly respected craft curator Grace Cochrane explains: "This extraordinary exhibition of flame-worked glass and other processes and materials, which crosses time and place, fantasy and reality, is underpinned by an equally extraordinary story of the research that went into it."

Mark Elliott is an experienced artist and saxophonist and, as a result of this project, a writer: he has written an historical novel to tell his "whimsical tale of intrigue, fantasy and earth repair hovering on the truth". With a spirit of openness, curiosity and collegiality Mark has expanded his solo show to include collaborations with 17 other creatives - artists, curators, designers, a music composer and even a scent smith who have brought their own creative gestures to this unique project. For Mark, this collaboration expresses the 'essence' of his project: "at the heart of my story is an attempt to understand a basic fact that many people across the world are now rediscovering: we humans are not a lone island in a sea of lesser life-forms put here for our disposal, but a species needing to collaborate with our neighbours in the greater story of life – a lesson we absolutely must re-learn if we are to survive".

This exhibition is the latest in an ambitious project which started in 2016 when Craft ACT invited Mark to re-imagine the Corning's Spanish Trick Glass as part of the *History Repeated* show. Mark made *Apparatus for the Extraction of Cloud Essence* for the exhibition, after envisioning the Corning object as a 'Cloud Essence extractor' and creating characters and narratives. This work became the start of this ambitious and multi-layered series and was purchased by the Corning Glass Museum in 2016.

EXHIBITIONS: *Between Earth and Sky* and *Essence of Cloud*
ARTISTS: Jenni Kemarre Martiniello + Sharon Peoples and Mark Elliott
DATES: 25 March – 22 May 2021
<https://craftact.org.au/blogs/current-exhibitions>
LAUNCH EVENT: Thursday 25 March, 6pm with welcome to country by Jude Barlow and opening remarks by Mick Gentleman and Grace Cochrane.
FLOOR TALKS: Saturday 17 April at 1 pm with Jenni Kemarre Martiniello + Sharon Peoples
Saturday 8 May at 1pm with Mark Elliott

MEDIA CONTACT: For interview requests please contact Madisyn Zabel, gallery@craftact.org.au, 62629333.

Images: <https://flic.kr/s/aHsmUT43xQ>

Image caption (L-R): Sharon Peoples, Namadgi Gardening Gloves Panic Growth (detail). Photo: Brenton McGeachie. Mark Elliott, Cloud Essence bottles large tonic and small fragrance with funnel, circa 1870. Photo: Richard Weinstein.