

Fire Country: terrible beauty



Rebecca Selleck and James Tyler's *Fire Country*, invites the viewer into a household space, that is both deeply alluring and quietly unnerving. This sculptural and photographic installation mesmerises by channelling aspects of the material and psychological aftermath of Australia's 2019/20 black summer, into the domestic realm.

But rather than dwell on contemporary anxieties of European settler culture pyrophobia, the stark beauty of these pieces invites a deeper reflection upon contemporary human relationships with fire, on this ancient continent.



Fire Country, 1 is a carbonised ensemble of contemporary hardwood furniture, sealed with animal fats and arranged in an intimate, inward-looking spatial configuration. Laid out with the cool precision of an Ikea display show room, the bespoke, minimalist settings speak the language of capitalist power and tacit colonial conceits.

This smooth metanarrative is seared, however, by a salon hang of black and white landscape photographs. Each image refers to specific terrains located in southeast and south Australia, consumed by the recent wildfires. Both image and frame, bear scorched wounds – the memories and erasures of immolated Country. It is as if the imagery is the silent consciousness of the quotidian objects.



The photographs' testimony of the scale and force of destruction elicits a visceral sense of grief for the viewer standing in this work. It bears witness to repercussions of 200+ years of inappropriate land and fire management: just one of the many traumas enacted upon this country and its First Peoples, through colonisation.

And yet, there is discovery and surprise here. The sombre, monochromatic aesthetic is frequently interrupted by a swathe of cast bronze, organic shaped filaments, which directly reference the post fire flush of epicormic buds, leaves and fungi. They are amongst the first perceived biological responses to eucalyptus forest fires, and signal recovery.

In the wake of the fires that shook the planet, these diminutive organisms were desperately relished by the human gaze, as we grappled with the implications of unimaginable carnage. So welcome and verdant, they offered an absolute reinstatement of nature's immense capacity for renewal. Likewise, the tiny, potent, sculptural inclusions, visually, and metaphorically crackle. They rupture the still, charred furniture, emanating from its heartwood and invigorating it with the promise of new life, of hope in the darkness.

¹ which shares title with Victor Steffensen's compelling book on Indigenous land management practices, *Fire Country*, 2020, Hardie Grant Publishing, Victoria.

Fire Country is a disarmingly meditative spatial experience, born of deep reflection on the destruction wrought by Australia's recent wildfires. It is an installation charged with potent psychic energy, drawn deep from the incinerated forests and those that predate them.



Seduced by the terrible beauty of these furnishings, we are lured into urgent reflection on how this continent has been formed by and evolved with, fire. We are challenged to probe the Eurocentric fear of fire that pervades the colonial imagination and psyche; the remnant glow of which fuels our phobias and failing management practices towards Australia, to date.

James Tyler and Bec Selleck are part of a future-thinking critical mass of young Australian artists presenting the public with contemporary scientific understandings that coalesce with existing Indigenous Australian fire-knowledge and land practices.



Fire Country is ultimately an invitation to sit with these difficult truths that underscore reality in our own homes and to see our country with renewed clarity and hope, where walking with fire ², becomes a norm towards sustainable land management.

Amanda Stuart,

16th May 2022

Yuin Country

I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank Dr Johanna Hoyne for her impeccable discussion, edits and proof reading.

² <https://www.firesticks.org.au/dharrawal-yuin-ngurra/> accessed 15 May 2022