

Essay

Penny Craswell

An artist's residency has a particular power that comes from a confluence of different factors. There's the location – often just being in a different place can give you a new perspective. Then there's time – the purposeful clearing of schedules can have a big impact when it comes to the pursuit of creativity. Then there's company – learning and inspiration can come from interesting conversations with people you meet on a residency. And the combination of these three factors – a new location, time to think and work, and new conversations – can have a fundamental change on an artist's practice and work.

For textile artist Valerie Kirk and glass artist Harriet Schwarzrock, the 2021 Craft ACT Artist-in-Residence program gave them the opportunity to spend three weeks at the Gudgenby Ready-Cut Cottage in Namadgi National Park, bookended by time spent at Geoscience Australia. The cottage was built in 1927 and has been the site of the Craft ACT Artist-in-Residence program since 2006. It is located within the stunning landscape of the national park, about 30km south of the Namadgi Visitor Centre. "I love being in the National Park," says Valerie Kirk. "I've been there several times before, but I realised there was a lot more I wanted to explore." Harriet Schwarzrock says: "We had the luxury of the time and space to walk in almost any direction. It felt like we were very remote, which is, in itself, a treat."

In this part of Namadgi, granite outcrops and overhangs are a significant geological presence in the landscape. The 2019–2020 fires had a significant impact on the land, with more than 80 per cent of the Namadgi National Park burned and then two days of pouring rain doing even more damage. It had a particularly fascinating effect on the boulders, with the fire scorching and cracking the granodiorite rock with such high temperatures that, in some places, the rock has sheared off a layer like an onion skin. "The fires created such destruction," says Harriet. "It laid bare the landscape and you were made aware of the geology because of the fires."

The three weeks that the two artists spent in a cottage were productive and harmonious. After spending the first couple of days walking and talking, the two artists fell into a rhythm of walking and working alone during the day and coming together in the evenings. They took it in turn to cook dinner, while the other made the fire, then they ate, talked and worked together in the evenings. "We would both be working with some conversation and exchange of ideas," says Valerie. "We respected each other's space and had quiet times and interaction."

As well as living together in the cottage, the time at Geoscience Australia also had an important influence on the work of both artists. There were two days of lectures and talks at the beginning of the residency, then another period of time when they could go anywhere they liked, look at the collection and talk to staff. Both artists were able to spend time looking through Geoscience's extensive National Mineral and Fossil Collection. This experience, both before and after the residency in Namadgi, can be seen in the works that the artists created on returning home.

Valerie Kirk has created four major tapestries, the largest of which has a lower section depicting plant fossils and specimens from the Mary White collection at Geoscience Australia and her book, *Australia's Fossil Plants*. The tapestry's middle section has plants in white on green, which references vintage educational charts and a strip at the top shows a panorama view from Gudgenby valley to the hills and mountains on the horizon.

A second, vertical tapestry to the right continues this panoramic view at the top, while the rest of the work is a representation of rocks found in the park. "Usually when preparing to weave, I would make a detailed drawing then enlarge this to full scale as a digital print that sits behind the warps as a guide for weaving, but this time, there was nothing behind the warp – the rocks were on the floor of the studio and I was weaving from them directly, just trusting my intuition."

The last two, long thin vertical tapestries to the left of the centrepiece are of the same landscape at night and in the day. The tall narrow shape of the tapestries is inspired by the core samples of rock that are found in the Geoscience Australia collection.

Harriet Schwarzrock has created three works as a result of the residency, one a series of drawings, one of small copper sculptures and one of glass and mixed media. The drawings were made on site at the cottage. One rainy day, Harriet began mark making on large square format paper using long free strokes of ink and then putting these out in the rain to see how they weathered. Video of the raindrops on paper show how the water makes the ink bleed, while the sound they make is very pleasing.

A second series of small copper sculptures was directly inspired by the copper specimens at Geoscience. Harriet brought to the cottage some reclaimed copper wire mesh, which she pulled apart in her 'un-weaving' pieces, works also inspired by the burnt landscape of Namadgi. Her third body of work is a combination of made and found pieces including neon text, reading 'Impermanence', 'Tenuous' and 'Transitory' in neon (made by Steven Cole) and then combined with a variety of materials in a box, prompted by the way the specimens at Geoscience are boxed up.

Interestingly, both artists specialise in a form of art that is difficult to transport on residencies – Valerie creates tapestries using large looms, while Harriet is a glass artist who needs specialised equipment to create work. This meant that both artists were returned to the basics of their art practice – to thinking, to conceptual work, to drawing or mark-making, or working with materials, like copper wire, that are more transportable.

In Valerie's work, this can be seen in the depth of ideas that inspired the final work – the time that she spent in research, reflection, drawing, note-taking and cataloguing has all informed her final works. For Harriet, the residency gave her the impetus and inspiration to work in mediums other than glass art, including ink on paper and metal sculpture, but also mixed media with glass. In the end, both artists have created extraordinary works drawing on the beauty of the

bush and what they learned about geology, but also on universal themes of deep time and landscape as place.