



TRIBUTARY PROJECTS

NON HUMAN BEING

GRACE BLAKE, MAHALA HILL, TRISTAN JALLEH, ANNIKA ROMEYN,
AND KAI WASIKOWSKI
CURATED BY GRACE BLAKE

Kirsten Farrell

Warm sun on the concrete in the early spring, late-night jazz bar instrumental music emanating from the nearby remnant sex shop. No people show themselves but then Fyshwick as a post-anthropocene stage set is not a great stretch. Any foray into the back streets on a weekend, especially after time away in a more populated part of the planet, and the slide into eerie is easy to make. Apt, then, to have an exhibition based on imagined futures without humans (utopic or dystopic?) at Tributary Projects, in the apparently empty heart of Canberra. Curated by Grace K Blake, *Non Human Being* posits five artists' responses to the idea of evolution beyond the demise of humanity, but possible worlds in which the presence or aftermath of humanity prevails.

These are big possibilities jostling in a small space, a bunch of introductions to science fictions, windows into other possible worlds. There is no obvious judgement or political point of view presented, though strictly speaking a climate change sceptic might take issue with the very concept of humanity changing the environment of the planet. Blake cites the influence of philosopher/art theorist Benjamin Bratton and Timothy Morton, proponent of Object Oriented Ontology (arguably the best acronym ever, OOO, coincidentally or not the name of the fictional post human-ish world in which the cartoon *Adventure Time* is set) as her touch point in pulling together *Non Human Being*. I do love *Adventure Time* for its weirdly cheerful lack of judgment of the non-specific human f**k up that must have happened in order for it to be happening. It is at best exhausting to deal with our daily present reality of impending environmental or nuclear catastrophe on a grand scale. The political near-blankness of this exhibition leaves space for imagining other possible futures. Morton's Object Oriented Ontology is a radical proposal that essentially calls for humanity to reconfigure its attitude toward the non-human, not just other forms of life but objects and all forms of being. The

principle at the base of this philosophy is kindness and solidarity, as if existence itself rather than the capacity to reason should be the bottom line in considering how humanity should occupy the planet. Although it does seem a very bleeding heart lefty-type idea, arguably by lowering the common denominator politics or any other kind of judgement-based division could be cancelled out. In theory.

I like that about *Non Human Being*; it's as if judgement and reason (those cherished Kantian human faculties) have no place in the post-anthropocene, as if philosophy and god really are dead this time. As calmly as possible, this is a space for these artists consider that possibility.

Annika Romeyn's drawings blur the distinction between the macro and the micro. *Chasm 4* is a large monotype print of a rocky outcrop which takes a vertiginously low-down viewpoint towards the base of leafless tree reaching out over the void, looming over the head of the viewer. The sky above is blankly, ominously black. Its relentless realism and detail give no possibility for escape; the flick between admiration for the her mastery of her medium traps you in the picture with the sky, rocks or tree or all three about to fall on top of you. And yet the beauty of this work saves it from being too heavy-handed a metaphor for impending doom. The *Chasm* series was made during Romeyn's residency at Hill End, in response to the mined landscape. There is not much moralising in this matter-of-fact presentation of a landscape, but the blackness of the image and the implications of dangerous depth in the title gives it an ominous feel.

Kai Wasikowska proposes that we have to get used to the idea of impending ecological doom. His fascination with technology, including the high-production value of what seem to be digitally collages of photographic landscapes described as 'pure pigment on archival paper'. The work in *Non Human Being*, *Realtree #4* is more or less constructed like a landscape painting, with its component fore, middle and backgrounds. On closer inspection some things are a little off key: the plants though perfectly formed are greyish and transparent in places. For its place in the image and the cliff face in the background does not bear a clear relation to the foreground. The apparent perfection of the image does not quite comply with the one-point Cartesian perspective humans presume to be 'reality'. Then there are the red laser beams visible beneath and between the layers of foliage. The image is freighted with the suggestion the logic of some other system: is it a computer interface, or, extrapolating further, an artificial intelligence which has a non-human need to construct this image? The paradox of the speculative fiction that these works propose is that the very technology that makes them possible is part and parcel of the thing that humanity does that has got us into the position of having to consider environmental disaster: the fetish we make of technological advancement.

Tristen Jalleh's *Patio Ops* is a short looping single channel video, whose aesthetic recalls that immersive video games where the player as a protagonist moves through a world and encounters enemies/puzzles/quests. In *Patio Ops* the centre of the scene is some kind of technological cross-hair which implies an 'eye' or a target, but there is no hint of any body or avatar to which this view belongs. The 'eye' moves slowly, smoothly implying a robotic or non-organic point of view. There is nothing especially out of place as the eye moves through space, an architectural space, a patio, without any obvious human presence except that it is recognisable as a domestic space of some kind. The sound track is minimal; in the first part of the video bird calls can be heard intermittently. There is a disconcerting sense that just around the next corner some Thing will be encountered, but this doesn't happen. The view simply switches to another scene, another patio connected only by the same circular viewfinder that mechanically floats through the space. Who is controlling this view and what are they looking for? Is it a drone or an AI? In this scene there are signs of wreckage or disarray and the sounds switch from the occasional bird to blips. Who is surveilling what and why? What happened to all the people: all that is left is technology-mediated representation of space and a sense of disembodiment. The installation of the screen in the space is low down so that viewer looks at it from a drone-eye view.

By contrast Mahala Hill's *Cataclysmal* leaves technology behind altogether to imagine what might survive an apocalypse. Her oddly whimsical constructions consist of white bone china, ceramic, glass and porcelain boulders that have been constructed to deliver a series of chemical reactions called 'burn out' that results from organic materials combusting within the ceramic when it is fired. This produces alchemical conglomerations of mineral-like crystalline colours within the white rock forms. These would be rather abstract as is but are pulled into focus by figuratively modelled insect creatures that inhabit some of the forms, striking triumphant poses. Are they the survivors of the aftermath of an unnamed event that has changed the chemical composition of the face of the earth, new mutations or species who, by dumb luck have been propelled into an advantageous evolutionary position? What kind of existence can they look forward to, or is looking forward to anything itself a peculiarly human occupation, and do these creatures have no desire to achieve any thing at all but simply exist?

Grace K Blake is concerned with possible near futures. Her series (*Ruins, Biomass and Ammonia*, 2016-17, digital prints on Chicago voile) are abstracted speculative fictions that use the aesthetics of the digital to construct scenarios that bear little trace of human occupation. She is concerned with how data and images might survive human existence. Her work can be categorised as post-internet; it presupposes and uses technology omnivorously: images collated from life on the internet, digital

collage using various software that enable recombinant composition, digital printing technology outsourced to production companies who usually deal in marketing. In *Non Human Being* the work demands engagement from viewers to be apprehended, and resists any kind of complete visual capture, in a nod to the idea of the digital iceberg that is the internet. It is a digital collage delivered slickly and silkily on large sheer polyester fabric suspended from the ceiling to the floors over the frontage of the space. This renders the image porous in the daylight, and the indistinct components of the collage itself consists of pictures of the urban and built environment taken on her mobile phone in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia bleed and ebb with the movement of the sheer fabric. The crowded composition and the origin of its imagery in Blake's travel and engagement with South East Asia seems to parallel the impossibility of summarising a culture or an experience through images with the impossible task of depicting the internet.

Our human brains are imaginative and inventive but our collective endless desire for more and better itself has brought us to a tipping point where massive change is not a matter of if but when. When we are gone, the planet will go on; *Non Human Being* leaves me wondering whether that might not be such a terrible thing after all.

Tristen Jalleh

I see the cross hairs and movement this work as a reference to non human seeing (AI / machine) rather than a video game/ military thing, obvious reference can be made to Faroki machine eyes and operational images.