



LILY MAE
MARTIN
OVERBURDEN
EUREKA CENTRE BALLARAT
3 February – 2 August 2020

OVERBURDEN

Overburden is an exhibition of recent drawings by Lily Mae Martin which explores our relationship with, and perception of, the natural world. Through close observation of the landscape of the Victorian Central Highlands, Lily Mae has uncovered evidence of past catastrophic environmental exploitation and destruction caused by mining during the Victorian Gold Rush. Her drawings expose unremembered traces of this colonial disfigurement of the land. Nature's remarkable recuperative capacity is also revealed, as both a redemptive force and a contributor to the erasure of memory. *Overburden* uncovers the legacy of Gold Rush mining, highlighting its ongoing impact on the health of the environment and on our society's current and future wellbeing.

Lily Mae was raised in metropolitan Melbourne, but in 2014 she moved to Waterloo, a rural locality near the regional city of Ballarat. At first, she found this new landscape almost incidental to her daily life and her artistic practice. Uninspired by the Australian landscape painting tradition, which she considered 'male and dull'¹, her impassive response to these surroundings began with studies of animal bones against the forest floor. The proximity of nature was quietly compelling though and eventually demanded a deeper artistic response. Lily Mae writes, '*In the silence, the distance, I found myself asking questions of myself and, crucially, my practice: how can I understand the landscape, and by exploring it through my art, what exactly am I exploring?*'²

In 2016 Lily Mae completed a series of drawings of the landscape around her home adjoining the Waterloo State Forest. She was surprised when a friend remarked that the forest depicted in her new drawings looked very young. '*This struck me as I realized how much I hadn't really thought about the landscape itself but had been focusing instead on how I could speak through it - use it as a way of exploring human life and experiences without directly depicting them. But of course, the reason the forest is so young is due to the impact of humans - in particular, the Gold Rush*', she writes.³ From initially viewing this wilderness as pure and unadulterated, she began to see it differently: as deeply impacted by, and embedded in, the

history of colonial exploitation and expansion.

Gold Rush mining practices transformed the topography of Victoria, but we are only now coming to terms with its lasting consequences. Archaeologists Susan Lawrence and Peter Davies have brought to light this widespread environmental transformation of the Victorian landscape, notably through their book, *Sludge*. *Sludge* uncovers the history of rapacious environmental destruction caused by past mining practices, especially through the spread of tailings known as sludge. When released into waterways - whether accidentally or deliberately - sludge spread through towns and across farms, at times causing death by drowning and leaving a toxic mess in its wake. Sludge was a significant issue in colonial Victoria - resulting in a Royal Commission in 1858-59 -⁴ but one which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had almost been entirely forgotten.⁵ Lawrence and Davies offer a grittier counterpoint to the popular romanticised version of the Gold Rush noting, '*The environmental impact of mining is a huge void in these histories*'⁶.

Today our failure to recognise our anthropogenic imprint on the environment is played out controversially in the act of climate change denial. The reasons underpinning the widespread societal ignorance of environmental damage has been researched by psychologist Peter Kahn who found, '*With each ensuing generation, the amount of environmental degradation increases, but each generation in its youth takes that degraded condition as the non-degraded condition - as the normal experience*'.⁷ He calls this way of perceiving nature, '*environmental generational amnesia*'⁸.

Lawrence and Davies also reflect on our collective blindness to environmental damage, with reference to Forest Creek in Chewton, Victoria. They describe how, '*Miners dug it over again and again after the discovery of gold in the creek bed in 1851. Both valley and creek were filled with mud and mining waste, then torn up again by dredging in the twentieth century*'.⁹ Despite this devastation, they describe the contemporary Forest Creek landscape as positively bucolic. They correct this illusion stating, '*Forest Creek...is no gentle landscape*'... *It is a*

1 Anthony Camm interview with Lily Mae Martin, November 2019

2 Martin, Lily Mae, artist's statement, 2020

3 Ibid

4 Lawrence, S. & Davies P., *Sludge: Disaster on Victoria's Goldfields*, La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc., Carlton, Victoria, Australia, 2019, p.149

5 Ibid, p.177

6 Ibid, p.6

7 Kahn, P. H., Jr. 'Children's affiliations with nature: Structure, development, and the problem of environmental generational amnesia' in P. H. Kahn, Jr. & S. R. Kellert (Eds.), *Children and nature: Psychological, sociocultural, and evolutionary investigations*. MIT Press, 2002, p.97

8 Ibid, p.106

9 Lawrence & Davies., op. cit., p.3



Mine entrance, Black Hill 2019
Ink on cotton paper
76 x 56cm



Canadian, mine entrance 2019
Ink on cotton paper
76 x 56cm

complex place where the results of past human interventions and dynamic natural processes have become closely entangled. The river has gradually reshaped its bed according to the hydrological processes that govern flowing water everywhere, but the materials it works with, the sands and gravels and silts of the channel and surrounding floodplain, were deposited there by people more than a century ago.¹⁰

Building on her Waterloo State Forest series, with Lawrence and Davies' *Sludge* guiding her research, Lily Mae began to more concertedly address the deep deception that the regeneration of plant and animal life had wrought across a landscape corrupted by mining. Her new-found knowledge inspired a deeper investigation into the forgetting of environmental mining disasters across the Victorian goldfields. Through walking and drawing she began to see the landscape differently: as heavily impacted by mining and transformed by earthworks - abandoned mine shafts, mullock heaps, and the abundant evidence of sludge that once clogged water systems and transformed the topography of the land. Some remnants of mining are well understood in local communities, and Lily Mae has drawn such places; mullock heaps on the Beaufort - Lexton Road and abandoned mines in Canadian and Black Hill, both suburbs of Ballarat. But she also discovered areas where mining had occurred that seemed almost entirely reclaimed by nature.

Lily Mae's exploration of the tension between the exploited,

churned over landscape and its extraordinary capacity for recuperation is notably advanced in her major drawing, *Open Cut - Black Hill* (cover image). Black Hill is one of Ballarat's most prominent mining landmarks. Whereas much evidence of Gold Rush-era mining in Ballarat has been covered-up by urban development or regenerated parkland, Black Hill's mining provenance looms large both geographically and in the community's imagination. Lily Mae explores Black Hill's embodied ambiguity. Black Hill speaks of nature's impulse to expand and overwhelm and humanity's desire to contain and control, including through the design of parks and reserves that monumentalise an imposed colonial aesthetic.

Lily Mae's practice involves a close observation that repositions nature, not as a pristine folly of our making, but as a sovereign redemptive force capable of remarkable survival and reorganisation in response to environmental disaster. Her disentanglement of the anthropogenic stain on the land propels a dialogue between the past and present, mediated through the act of drawing. *'So much about history is about the human story - but we so rarely ask about the stories of the land. What about the environment in which we live; what do we value and what do we throw away? What do we put in museums and what is left on private farms, in state forests?*'¹¹ she writes.

Drawing can be an empathetic process; an intimate collaboration between artist and subject. When drawing

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 3

¹¹ Martin, op. cit.



Beaufort - Lexton Road 2019
Ink on cotton paper
56 x 76cm

the landscape, this empathy can be unconsciously revealed through the emergence of anthropomorphic elements. Such elements, although not conspicuous, are discernible in Lily Mae's drawings. For an artist who had mostly pursued the representation of the human form, a conceptual shift was needed to locate her practice with reference to the landscape tradition in art. This shift came through her research into the history of mining in her community and the profound uncovering of abandoned memories hidden in the land. A commitment to giving voice to the land instilled in her a vigilant attention to the avoidance of slippage into anthropomorphism, with its problematic subjectiveness and privileging of emotion over reason.

Black and white brings an authoritative voice to Lily Mae's drawings that speak of covered-up histories of colonial dispossession and environmental exploitation. The process of drawing in black and white involves the agile traversing of extremes. In the grey liminal realm between black and white, the past and present merge, allowing us to see the previously unseen. Black and white evokes a vexed dualism widely featured in the art and mythology of Western civilisation, where white represents light/pure/good and black represents dark/impure/bad. The act of drawing stolen Indigenous land in black and white - a deeply associative Western idiom that is emblematic of the colonial project of claiming and classifying - highlights the act of dispossession embedded in the transfigured landscape and positions nineteenth century gold mining at the centre of the advancement of colonisation.

At a time when digital images are ubiquitous and photography is instant and easily altered, Lily Mae's dedicated act of drawing has a rare authority. Her use of black and white brings to her drawing a strong metaphorical association with truth-telling. Nicholas Bourriaud writes about the uptake



Clunes 2019
Ink on cotton paper
56 x 76cm

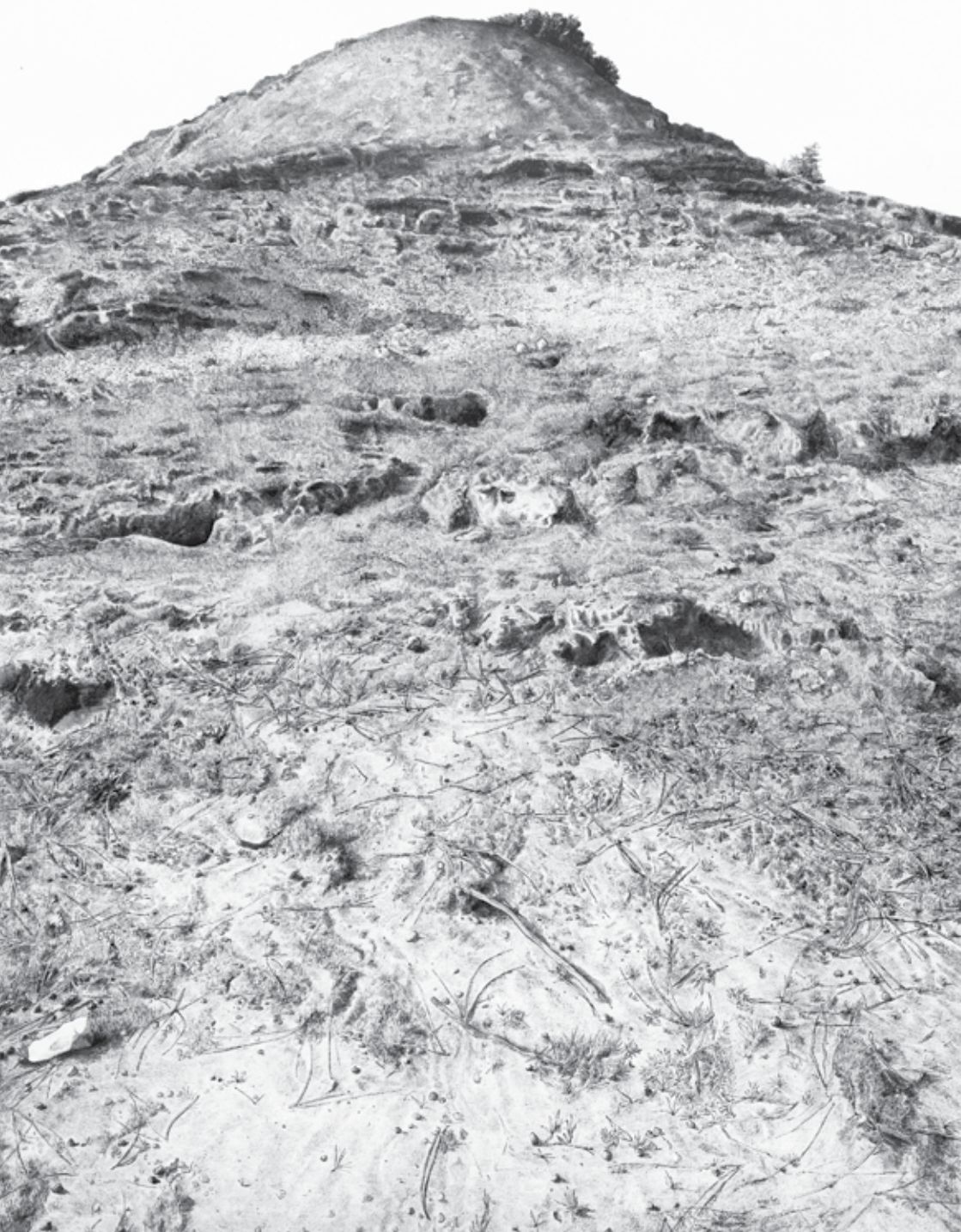
of black and white by contemporary artists in recent years stating that it, '...provides a metaphor for the past; it signifies that the images on display belong to History. But at the same time black-and-white refers to an ethical environment, a climate of authenticity, inasmuch as the images seem to come from a technological landscape that preceded digital manipulation and Photoshop. When it is produced on the scene of contemporary life and culture, black-and-white signals the aesthetics of evidence, cutting through historical and ideological falsifications.'¹²

While nature can inspire in us a deep reverie, Lily Mae's drawings make no appeal to the sublime and no attempt at seducing the viewer through panoramic spectacle. Like nature itself, her drawings are almost entirely devoid of sentimentality. We often view nature from a safe distance, privileging the orderly grandeur of the vista over the chaotic schema of the forest floor. However, the locations presented in these drawings are not deep in a remote wilderness, but rather on the fringes of suburban Ballarat and nearby country towns. Lily Mae strips away nature's veneer of regeneration and brings traces of environmental degradation to the fore. She reveals the past trauma lurking under the surface of the land. But *Overburden* is not a reckoning with humanity; it offers neither condemnation nor forgiveness, only the stimulus to 'notice what we don't notice',¹³ and through that awareness, to better understand our place in the world.

Anthony Camm, Eureka Centre Manager.

Sludge, Creswick 2019 (right)
Ink on cotton paper
76 x 56cm

12 Bourriaud, N., translated by Erik Butler, *The Exform*, Verso Books, Brooklyn, NY, 2016, (e-book), p 64
13 Martin, op. cit.



LILY MAE MARTIN

OVERBURDEN

EUREKA CENTRE BALLARAT

3 February – 2 August 2020

Exhibition opening:

Thursday 13 February 2020 at 6pm

Artist's acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Ruth Pullin, Dr David Waldron, Dr Benjamin Mountford, Amy Tsilemanis, Anna Kyi, Julie McLaren, Anthony Camm, Eureka Centre, Ballarat Mechanics' Institute, Sovereign Hill, Gold Museum, Art Gallery of Ballarat and of course my two greatest loves - Gene and Anja.

Lily Mae Martin is represented by Scott Livesey Galleries

EUREKA CENTRE BALLARAT

102 Stawell Street South
Eureka, Ballarat, Victoria, 3377
AUSTRALIA
T - +61 03 5333 0333
eurekainfo@ballarat.vic.gov.au
facebook.com/eurekacentreballarat



Eureka Centre is a cultural facility of the City of Ballarat

The City of Ballarat respectfully acknowledges the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung people - traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work.



ISBN: 978-0-6487673-0-5

Published by Eureka Centre Ballarat, Edition 5000

WRITER Anthony Camm | ARTIST Lily Mae Martin | PHOTOGRAPHY Gene Hammond-Lewis | DESIGN City of Ballarat



Chute - Waterloo Road 2019
Ink on cotton paper
19 x 14cm



Unnatural Formation 2019
Ink on cotton paper
19 x 14cm

Open Cut - Black Hill 2019 (cover)
Ink on cotton paper
76 x 138cm