

# PAUL E MASON

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CLIMATE ANXIETY ARK

EUREKA CENTRE BALLARAT

7 May – 18 November 2022

# CLIMATE ANXIETY ARK – PAUL E MASON

Paul E Mason's exhibition, *Climate Anxiety Ark*, exploits the language of the museum through meticulously crafted sculptures that reference reliquaries, automatas and dioramas. These objects expose the museum as an apologist for colonialism, and its cloistered artefacts alternately as a source of unequivocal truth or frivolous, illusory spectacle. Interpretive and design tropes and famous museum objects are reimagined and reframed to expose the privileging of Western over Indigenous knowledge systems. Combining dissonant visual elements from the past and present, the artist connects the colonial legacy of dispossession and exploitation to the current reality of an unfolding climate disaster.

Throughout *Climate Anxiety Ark*, colonialism and environmental exploitation are linked through the leitmotif of the thylacine (Tasmanian tiger). Most conspicuously, an eponymous sculpture presents a thylacine skeleton inside a hybrid museum case and Victorian arcade game. Hand-winding the contraption triggers the skeleton to rotate, sets off flashing lights and plays a bittersweet song warning of societal collapse.<sup>1</sup> This carnivalesque merging of science and spectacle interrogates the idea of resurrecting the thylacine from DNA extracted from museum specimens.

Paul writes, “*This thylacine is trapped in time. Its skeletal remains are containerised aboard a familiar vessel; an Ark. Our encounter probes extinction by its animating presence, the physical engagement of winding, listening, watching. Should we turn the handle slower or faster? When will the music stop? What will happen with this art and science experiment? What does it mean to come face to face with thylacine remains in the age of extinction?*”<sup>2</sup>

Museums have traditionally been perceived as holding interesting but moribund objects, metaphorically ‘brought to life’ through interpretation. But this sculpture speaks of an emboldened museum that operates as an incidental storehouse of DNA and a gene bank prototype. This reference to the biblical ark could be a call for real-world action or it could allude to a provocative idea to establish a gene bank on the Moon – a ‘lunar ark’ that would protect 6.7 million DNA specimens against

a ‘potential existential threat to biodiversity on Earth’.<sup>3</sup>

When approaching the ‘ark’, the viewer has a choice: do they turn the crank and resurrect the thylacine or not? This prompts us to think about where society’s efforts and resources should be directed in saving the planet: to practical global emissions reductions and environmental preservation or to fantastical DNA resurrection projects. The prescient moment between action or inaction is perhaps the space where ethics, reason and solutions ultimately reside.

The sculptures in this exhibition draw on the symbolism of the thylacine to connect the contemporary problem of climate change to Australia’s colonial past. The last thylacine died in 1936 and has since become a taxidermy icon of the Australian museum. The thylacine was a conspicuous obstacle to the imposition of European farming systems in Tasmania. It was vigorously culled and, once finally extinct, reimagined as an almost mythical creature that lingers in a liminal space between past/present, truth/fiction, presence/absence, and life/death. In this ambiguous state, the thylacine becomes a simulation that obscures the hard truth of Indigenous dispossession and environmental destruction, and makes amenable, through distracting romanticism, its supplanting by settler colonialism.

Nicholas Smith has considered the disruptive implications of the thylacine’s purported extinction: ‘*The thylacine’s status as simultaneously ‘probably extinct’ and “possibly surviving” gives rise to a creative tension. The tension generates a space in which human imagination can flourish. The thylacine’s anomalous status and its unusual marsupial characteristics heighten its liminality. Any creature that challenges or defies conventional classification is potentially a symbolic device onto which many imaginings may and will be loaded. Human symbolism thrives on such ambiguity*’.<sup>4</sup>

‘ETR’<sup>5</sup> is a provocative representation of Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, pinned down and mauled by a thylacine. At your behest, should you

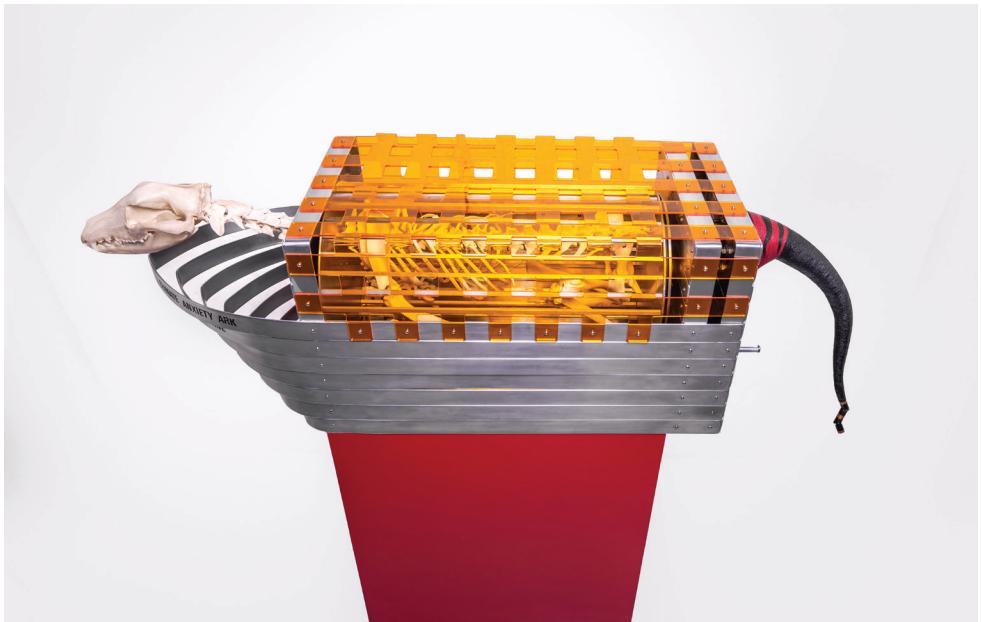
1. ‘The Modern Ark’, music and lyrics by Jake Mason and Eric McCusker

2. Mason, Paul E., artist’s statement, 2021

3. Baker, Harry, ‘Scientists want to store DNA of 6.7 million species on the moon, just in case’ in *Live Science*, published 14 March 2021 <https://www.livescience.com/proposed-lunar-ark-for-biodiversity.html>, retrieved 29/03/2022

4. Smith, Nicholas, ‘The Return of the Living Dead: Unsettlement and the Tasmanian Tiger’ in *Journal of Australian Studies*, Volume 36, Issue 3, 2012, p. 283-84

5. ‘ETR’ is the abbreviated title for ‘Extinct thylacine returns to exact revenge on Prime Minister for his inaction on climate change’



Paul E. Mason, *CLIMATE ANXIETY ARK* 2022, 54 x 128 x 32cm, SoundClip Audio, LEDs, electrical components, aluminium, stainless steel, acrylic, epoxy resin, high density foam, brass, hemp cord, nitrile.

choose to start the automata, the creature will attack this rudimentary likeness of the Prime Minister, who is only distinguished by a baseball cap. The attack unfolds to the strains of Hawaiian music - a scornful reference to the Prime Minister's much-pilloried 2019 'bushfire' holiday and perhaps an allusion to Captain Cook's death in Hawaii - thereby connecting the Australian Government's climate change policy to the very origins of the colonial project.

'ETR' references '*Tipu's Tiger*' (c. 1794-9), an automaton created for the Sultan of Mysore to reflect his disgust for British rule. The Mysore kingdom fell on 4 May 1799 and the Sultan was killed.<sup>6</sup> '*Tipu's Tiger*' was stripped of its cultural specificity the moment it was looted from the palace. It eventually arrived in England and became a popular curiosity. Newspapers described it as '...a royal tyger in the act of devouring a prostrate European officer...' and as '...sufficient proof (if any were yet wanting) of the deep hate and extreme loathing of Tippoo Saib towards the English nation'.<sup>7</sup>

The initial reception of '*Tipu's Tiger*' in England shows the way that local cultural meaning can be distorted to justify colonial oppression. Today the automaton is static and mute in London's Victoria and Albert Museum where it has metaphorically 'lost its bite'. It is no longer a menacing representation of 'the Other', but rather a debilitated exotic curiosity. In 'ETR', the appropriated tiger has morphed into a thylacine, thereby connecting the Australian nation state with colonialism's wider global legacy.

'Baudin's Coastal Prospecting Reliquary' is from a series informed by the French explorer Nicolas Baudin's maritime expedition to Australia in 1801. It features a supersized bark canoe filled with coastal rocks sourced from the Kimberley region, an area visited by Baudin. Guarded by a Napoleonic seaman, the canoe carries the curious bounty of two thylacines, an uprooted boab tree and stone implements. This improbable vessel is overloaded but remains afloat. It foreshadows impending disaster, but also speaks of survival and adaptation. The reliquary interrogates lingering notions that trade between explorers and

6. Sponge, Susan, 'Tipu's Tiger' in Tristam Hunt (ed.), *The Lives of the Objects*, London, V&A Publishing, 2020. p. 68  
7. *The Lives of Objects*, Ibid, p. 71 (cited)

Indigenous peoples was largely benign. It reminds us that colonisation occurred incrementally and is a continuing process, most voraciously expressed today through the practices of the mining industry.

*'Great Southern Gabion'* was inspired by the Great Victoria Desert where Paul saw a decimated landscape caused by the British atomic testing that occurred at Maralinga between 1956 and 1963. He was fascinated by the landscape yet appalled by the disregard for the human rights and land rights of the Maralinga Tjarutja traditional owners. In response, he has created what could be mistaken for a museum diorama charged with propagandising a glorious nation building enterprise.

The sculpture is dominated by '*a golden Gabion cage surrounding a map of iron rich mineral Australia*'.<sup>8</sup> This gridded map, filled with coastal ironstone, could symbolise the imposition of Western property ownership systems on stolen Indigenous land. The central container reveals semi-precious stone implements, while those flanking it alternately contain thylacine carcasses or Maralinga gravel. The shipping containers expose a shameful cargo; dirty

secrets covered up by a lumbering map of Australia. The exactness of this assemblage is seductive, but its allusions to trade and the dissonant melding of geography, geology and biology undermines presumptions of Western exceptionalism in the age of the Anthropocene.

The sculptures in Climate Anxiety Ark could be viewed as nostalgic follies, but this is a ruse to provoke an encounter with powerful social themes. In each sculpture there is a formal and metaphorical interplay between the idea of what is hidden and what is exposed. The museum is a weighty metaphor for this idea, as it serves interchangeably as a colossal storehouse of hidden treasures and oddities or as a gatekeeper's distillation of sanctioned knowledge. In the tradition of political art, Paul delves into the darkest recesses of this stately trove to reveal its underbelly, creating a gleaned vision that baffles, amuses and provokes, but ultimately seeks to expose the truth.

**Anthony Camm**  
Eureka Centre Ballarat



Paul E. Mason, *EXTINCT THYLACINE RETURNS TO EXACT REVENGE ON PRIME MINISTER FOR HIS INACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE* 2020-21, 34 x 35 x 35cm, SoundClip Audio, electrical components, gold leaf, aluminium, stainless steel, MDF, Baltic pine, graphite, nylon, nitrile, gold size, auto lacquers.

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8. Mason, Op. Cit



Paul E. Mason, BAUDIN'S COASTAL PROSPECTING RELIQUARY 2018-22, 26 x 61 x 20cm,  
Diorite, aluminium, pine, gold, nylon, pewter, graphite, lead, Kimberley coastal stone.



Paul E. Mason, GREAT SOUTHERN GABION 2020, 19 x 38 x 45cm, Diorite, chert, Maralinga gravel, obsidian, granite,  
manganese, ironstone, graphite, gold, resin, brass, turquoise, aluminium.

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Cover image: Paul E. Mason, *GREAT SOUTHERN GABION 2020* (detail).

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