

The Remarkable Beauty in Disaster

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In introducing this remarkable exhibition by Debbie Symons and Jasmine Targett, I am reminded of a critical issue for environmental art as identified by the Gruen Transfer: the problem of the polar bear.

I am delighted that we have two of Monash University's finest researchers in the Fine Arts addressing this problem, in Debbie Symons and Jasmine Targett. They have developed their practices in relation to an international network of pre-eminent scientists — including NASA, Cambridge University, Monash Astrophysics and the Swiss-based IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. In this engagement of visual practices with the politics of science, they follow in the path of notable figures such as Barbara Kruger, Joseph Beuys and Olafur Eliasson; as well as Karl Linneaus, Joseph Banks and Al Gore.

Both Symons and Targett deal with the visual relay of information. Art at its best helps us to see, to perceive, understood as both vision and knowledge. Art can therefore be said to make the invisible, visible; it brings into focus the over-looked and the unforeseeable.

We live in a world of incredible luminosity: a hyper-ocular age, when military cameras in space can tell us not only who is walking beside us on the street, but what brand of shoes they are wearing, as Virilio describes in 'War and Cinema' (1984). Yet the paradox of our time is that we also live in an age of profoundly clouded vision: information is mediated, spun, orchestrated as never before by both mass media and systems of government, often in collaboration. In the words of the British Prime minister Benjamin Disraeli: there are three types of lies — lies, damned lies and statistics.

This hyper-ocular represents a complex problem for visual artists, in relation to ecological concerns. There is a remarkable beauty in disaster — as both Symons' and Targett's work demonstrates — and it is no wonder that there has been a dramatic growth in disaster movies as well as a documentary genre perhaps best described as 'landscape gore-nography' (in terms of both Al Gore, and gore-based horror movies). At the same time, with the widespread deployment of digital technologies for the representation of these images, as Baudrillard suggests we witness a slippage of the visual, as the hyper-ocular becomes hyperreal and we lose our sense of reality in the seduction of visual simulation.

Which is where these works lead us: to confront our own guilty pleasure, in wondering at the beauty of the horror Symons and Targett present; as well as acknowledgement of our own role in contributing to this, through a global excess of pleasure-seeking, without thought of its environmental consequences. The challenge the work presents is to engage in meaningful reflection on the causes and potential remedies for this situation: to be brave enough to see.